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MAGAZINE


OCT.



**GUN-WOLF
IN
SHEEPER'S
DUDS!**
by **WALT
CORN**

**PATTERSON
VAN CORT
RICHMOND**

THE WILDCATTER WAR
by **MAX KESLER**



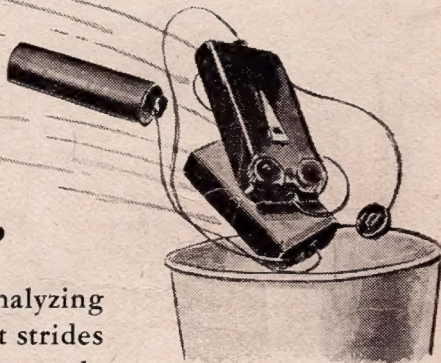


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Vol. 24, No. 4

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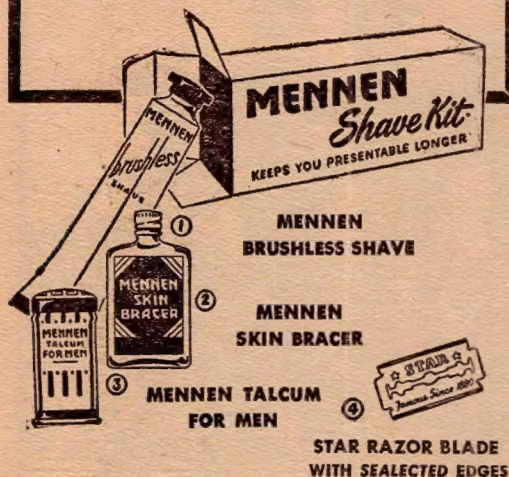
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Pair of Aces

By **JOHN T. LYNCH**

These two outlaw friends began a strange owlhoot partnership—each sworn to shoot the other on sight!

PONY DIEHL and Joel Fowler were always happy to meet each other. When they met, at frequent intervals, in Tombstone, they would spend hours drinking, playing poker, and talking shop together. They had a lot in common—both were vicious outlaws.

As both Diehl and Fowler already had partners-in-crime, they had never teamed up, although they kept promising each other that the time would come, one day, when they would join forces and pull something really big and profitable. As it was, Diehl and his partner, Butcher Knife Bill, and Fowler and his cohort, John Burns, were devoting most of their working hours to holding up stages and hi-jacking small wagon trains. But each pair operated in widely separated territories. They had a tacit agreement to keep out of one another's areas.

One night, standing at a bar, Pony Diehl yawned and said, "Wa'al, Joel, guess I'll call it an evenin'. Gotta git up early in th' mornin'. Me an' Butcher is goin' to stick up th' Clifton stage."

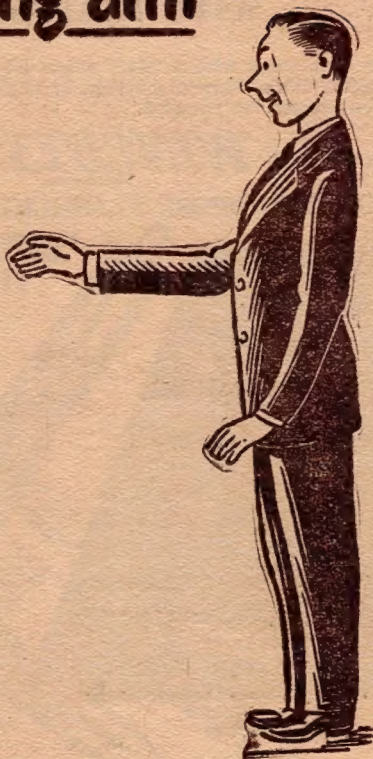
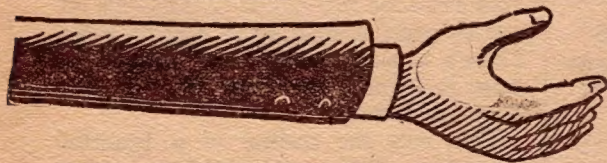
"How come th' Clifton stage?" Joel Fowler asked. "I've heard that nobody ever sends anythin' of value on that line."

"But, tomorra' it will be different," Pony said, his eyes glittering. "I got a good tip-off that th' Clifton stage will have a nice, juicy mine payroll cash-box on it."

(Continued on page 8)

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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 6)

Mebbe so as much as fifteen thousand dollars!"

After Pony left, Fowler stood at the bar for awhile. He was thinking. When he was ready to leave he spotted his partner, John Burns, intent on a card game.

"John," he said, "better get some sleep. Tomorrow we ride out to Clifton—me an' you are goin' to hold up th' Clifton stage. There's a payroll on it—an' there's no sense in lettin' Pony Diehl have it, even if we are friends!"

This was the ending of a beautiful friendship. The next afternoon, when Pony Diehl and Butcher Knife Bill halted the Clifton stage, the disgusted driver, hands in air, complained, "Damn if this ain't gettin' monotonous."

"Cut out th' remarks an' give us th' payroll yuh got aboard!"

"That's just it," the driver said. "Two gents just held me up an' took th' box already."

"Got any idea who it was?" asked Pony. "I'll hunt down th' dirty crooks and—"

"I think I know who it was," the driver said. "They both had dirty handkerchiefs around their faces, under their eyes—but th' voice of th' one sounded ezzactly like a gent I used to know, purty well, over to Tombstone. Fellow called Joel Fowler."

"Joel Fowler! My friend! Why, th' dirty snake-bellied—c'mon, Bill. We gotta' catch up to him an' Burns afore they git to Tombstone—which is where they're probably headin' with their dishonest money!"

About four miles from Tombstone Joel Fowler, his pockets and shirt-front bulging with currency, slowed his horse down to an easy lope. "Don't want to look too trail-worn when it git to town," he told his partner, Burns. "Anyhow, we ain't seen nothin' of Diehl or Butcher Knife this far—so I guess they don't suspect."

John Burns, also loaded with currency which they had removed from the heavy box before throwing it away, suddenly noticed that one of his shirt buttons was open. He turned in his saddle to look back up the trail, in case any of the money had spilled out. His attention was arrested by two riders, just topping a rise

PAIR OF ACES

in the distance. "Joel, look up th' trail," he said. "Can that be—?"

Fowler turned hurriedly. "Can't tell for sure, but it might be Pony and Butcher Knife. C'mon, pull over into yonder bushes, behind them big boulders. If it is them—!"

Fowler and Burns hid their horses in a dry gulch, nearby. Their buckshot-loaded double-barreled shotguns held in deadly readiness, they crouched at the side of the trail, well-hidden from the view of the two unsuspecting riders who were approaching. Pony and Butcher Knife rode right into the ambush—they had not spotted the two men on the trail ahead of them. Fowler fired at his friend, Pony Diehl. Burns ended Butcher Knife Bill's career with a blast square in the face.

As Fowler and Burns surveyed their bloody handiwork, Burns said, "Joel, these two gents was our friends. Mebbe so we oughta bury 'em. Besides, if they're buried, nobody will find 'em lyin' here on th' trail. Then nobody won't ask no questions."

By sundown, Pony Diehl and Butcher Knife were resting in their shallow graves. Fowler congratulated himself for performing such a downright Christianlike and friendly gesture. As he gazed at the two unmarked graves he said to Burns, "Nobody'll ever find 'em here. But, it sure is lonely—only two graves."

"Yeh, that's right," Burns agreed. "Ain't a very big boothill, at that." As Burns turned his back to walk to his horse Joel Fowler quickly pulled his six-shooter. As he pumped three bullets into his partner's back he muttered, "Three graves ain't so lonely as two."

FOWLER made haste to get the currency out of his defunct partner's shirt-front and pockets before it became bloodstained. Then he dug another crude grave, dumped Burns' corpse into it, covered it up, and departed.

For a few months Joel Fowler used his head. Knowing it would be wise to lay low for a while, he made his way to an isolated ranch near Socorro, New Mexico, where a friend of his was ramrod. He worked well, as an ordinary cowhand, for

(Continued on page 128)

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Powerful Frontier

Novel



One of the masked figures
drew down on Albright.

By
WALT COBURN

Gun-Wolf

SHEEP AND GUNS DON'T MIX!

IT WAS sunrise when he rode up out of the badlands and across a wide flat stretch of benchland. He reined up at the rim of the high bench that looked down on the little ranch below on Wolf Creek. It was the beginning of June and the



"Mister, when the prison gates clang shut on a cowman's back, he says good-bye to his range and to all his love of mankind. . . . But, mister, when he comes home again, and finds his range crawlin' with blattin' sheep. . . . Well, are you sayin' good-bye smilin'—or good-bye dyin'?" . . .

in Sheep's Duds

buffalo grass headed out and along the creek. The giant cottonwoods were in full leaf and the wild hay in the pasture made a green blanket. The high willows that grew along the creek banks for miles were leafed out. There would be the smell of wild roses in bloom and a meadowlark singing.

And there were the log buildings and the weeds grown rank on their sod roofs, and the pole corrals. There below in the little valley along Wolf Creek it lay, just as he'd left it five years ago—his home ranch.

He was a tall, thin man, six feet tall and rawboned—lean and gaunt and bearded. His hair and beard were iron-gray now. And above the beard his skin was losing its prison pallor under the sun and wind. And from under heavy black brows his eyes, hard, slate gray, welled with tears and the tears coursed down into his beard.

He kept swallowing the hard aching lump in his throat and both his hands knotted as they gripped the saddle horn. The inside of his lean empty belly felt cold. Strong emotions tore him apart inside, and the quickened pulsing of his heart sent the blood pounding inside his throat.

There she lay, stretched out along Wolf Creek—his ranch. The log cabins and the pole corrals and branding chute that he had built with the help of a couple of Cree half-breeds who smoked kinni-kinnik with their tobacco and laughed and sang as they worked. The horse pasture fenced in by fence posts he had set. The barbed wire he had strung. The log cabin he had chinked and daubed. The barn and the cattle shed.

He'd built his pole corrals and the branding chute that linked them together, using wide strips of green rawhide to wrap the poles between the high posts. It had been sweating, hand-callousing labor, but it was a job he'd loved. He was building his home ranch here on Wolf Creek where he had homesteaded. Into the building of that little ranch had gone all his hopes and his dreams and a bit of a prayer he had learned at his mother's knee.

He had a few head of cows to start with and colts to breed and make into top cow-horses. He'd saved every dollar he could. He'd worn old patched Levi overalls and

shirts. He'd half-soled his boots and worn a Stetson hat till it was sweat-caked and had to be thrown away. He'd turn an emptied Durham sack inside out to get the last flake of tobacco. He'd stay away from town because he had no money to throw away on booze or gambling. He'd stay at the roundup camp while the rest of the outfit rode to town to celebrate. He'd put every dollar he made into his little home ranch. He'd put his heart and his soul into that little outfit of his.

That was what the big Ace of Diamonds outfit had taken away from him. They'd railroaded him to the State's prison at Deer Lodge, Montana, where he'd done five years for cattle rustling.

NOW he was back. And down yonder was his little home ranch just as he'd left it, looking just as he had pictured it night after night in the darkness of a prison cell. He'd been sick inside where there was no cure for what ailed him. His grin was gone, the laughter was dead within him. Bitter, brooding, homesick, he was like a caged wild animal.

He'd made fancy bridles from horse-hair dyed brilliant colors. He'd sent the horsehair bridles to some saloonkeeper to raffle off for twenty-five dollars—tobacco money. But he'd saved it until the day he got out of the pen. And when he got out he had used the money to buy a second-hand saddle and a second-hand six-shooter and a box of cartridges.

There it was, down yonder, and he saw it through tears that left his slate-gray eyes bleak and hard and cold as an over-cast winter sky.

Then beyond the ranch he saw the big grayish blot that moved and spread slowly, and a choked sound came from his twisted bearded mouth.

"*Sheep!*"

He'd had some horrible, terrible nightmares there in the pen, when he'd wake suddenly with a jerking twisting heave, staring wide-eyed into the blackness of his prison cell. But never in those nightmares had he visioned any band of sheep defiling his cattle range.

That gray blot that was a band of sheep leaving the bedground looked like a mass of gray maggots crawling, devouring, fouling the green hills.

"*Sheep!*"

He spat it out. Then he rode down off the high bench with his hand on his six-shooter, and the bitter hatred that poisoned him had the taste of bile in his mouth.

There was a canvas-covered sheep wagon camped on the creek a couple of miles below the ranch. A work team grazed in the pasture. The sheepherder was on horseback.

The sheepherder had two shepherd dogs that were moving the sheep off their last night's bedground. He rode at a walk. As he rode he watched the moving shadow he and his horse made on the ground.

He looked like no sheepherder the ex-convict had even seen. He was dressed like a range dude cowboy. He had on a red flannel shirt and white angora wool chaps, although the June weather was much too warm for fur chaps. He had silver-mounted spurs and a high-crowned, broad-brimmed hat that was carefully dented and cocked at an angle on his head.

He had a loop built in his ketch-rope and was swinging it. He'd swing a wide loop and throw at a sagebrush and miss and build another loop. He caught a sagebush and took his dallies around the saddle horn and touched his horse with the spurs and dragged the sagebush out by its roots. He dragged it across the ground, sitting with his weight in his left stirrup like a cowboy dragging a calf to the branding fire.

"One of mine!" He called out in a voice that was young and at the youthful stage where the voice changes. "Hot iron! Put 'er in my BF brand!"

The man from the Deer Lodge pen felt some of his bitter murderous fury slip away. A ghost of a grin twitched at his bearded lips. That sheepherder was a bald-faced kid playing Buffalo Bill.

He was up close before the young sheepherder was aware of him. He reined up. He was about sixteen, with sandy red hair and sky-blue eyes and a sunburnt nose. He grinned sheepishy at the bearded man and coiled up his rope and yanked the sagebush off and threw it away.

Then, even as his sheepish grin faded, a hard cold glint came into his eyes. He dropped his coiled rope over the horn of his new saddle and clawed awkwardly for the pearl-handled six-shooter he wore.

"If you've come to finish your black-guard job, mon, I'll gi' ye a fight!" The boy had a Scottish burr in his voice.

He had the fancy gun drawn when the bearded man jumped his horse close and batted the gun from the boy's hand. The silver-mounted, pearl-handled six-shooter glittered in the sunlight as it spun through the air and fell on the ground.

"Tuck in your red shirttail, kid. Leave the gun-slingin' to somebody that savvies that work. Who owns these stinkin' blatin' woolies?"

"Angus Forbes. I'm his son, Bob Forbes. I hate the dommed sheep. I'm no sheepherder. I'm tendin' camp. The Ace of Diamonds killed the sheepherder. Wolves and coyotes got into the band night before last. I got here yesterday with his grub. I found him gone and the sheep scattered. His two dogs were there guarding the scattered sheep. If ye had had a hand in that blackguard work, then ye're—"

"I had no hand in it. I just got here. I've bin gone a long time. Howcome you're runnin' sheep on this ranch?"

"It belongs to Angus Forbes. It's part of our range. My father bought it from the Bank. The Bank had a mortgage on it that was going to be picked up by the Ace of Diamonds—the Lothian brothers, Al and Dee and Art. But Angus Forbes beat 'em to it."

"Yeah. The Lothian boys." The bearded mouthed the Lothian name and spat it out like a bad taste.

"It's called the Jim Albright place. Jim Albright is in the pen for rustling Ace of Diamonds cattle. I can show you where he carved his name on the inside of the cabin door. The Ace of Diamonds railroaded big Jim Albright to the pen. That was just one of their dirty deals. When Big Jim gets outa the pen he'll come back here and he'll kill the three Lothian brothers where he finds 'em!"

THE boy's voice changed and broke in his tense excitement. His blue eyes glinted.

"Who says Albright will come back here?" asked the bearded man.

"Everybody. The Ace of Diamonds wanted his ranch, but that wasn't all of it. There was the Lothian girl, sister of the

three Lothian boys. Big Jim was stuck on Gail Lothian and wanted to marry her. She helped frame Big Jim on that cattle-rustlin' deal, and then married the stock inspector who swore he caught Albright stealin' cattle . . .

"Jerry Malone, the Stock Inspector turned in his badge and married Gail Lothian and now he's ramroddin' the Ace of Diamonds. Malone is a tough gunslinger. He's callin' all bets that Albright kin get the job done. Say, I'm talkin' too much!"

"Too much," said the bearded man. "You better pick up your gun. You might need it."

Bob Forbes was too much of a kid to read bitterness or hatred in a man's voice. Bob was too clean inside to know the sordid brutality that prison breeds into a man's heart.

Bob grinned at the fancy gun lying half-concealed there in the bunch grass. Five years ago Albright had known laughter. His grin had been wide and the sun had shone in his eyes. Now he had to hold himself back to keep from slapping the grin from the boy's face.

He saw the sunlight reflected in this boy's blue eyes and wanted to blind it with his fists. His fists clenched and the cold sweat of prison poison broke out all over him and beaded his bearded face until his skin glistened. The taste of murder was brassy and bitter in his mouth. He spat it out with a snarl.

"What's so comical, you damned half-baked sheepherdin' young idiot? Blabber-mouthed young son. Know all about Albright, don't yuh? Hell of a josh on Albright, ain't it? And the whole damned country yap-yappin' how he was made into a damn fool. And even the lousy stinkin' sheepherders that's fouled up his ranch with blattin' stinkin' maggots woolies is laughin' at Big Jim Albright, the sucker!"

Snarling, spitting it out, he crowded his horse close and reached out and grabbed the front of the boy's bright red flannel shirt. He yanked young Bob out of his stirrups. His other fist bunched and knotted till the knuckles showed bone white.

There was a trick he'd learned at the Deer Lodge pen. There in the prison yard you had your enemy spotted and you

waited and waited. It might be days or weeks until the chance came and the guards weren't watching and you grabbed your man by the shirt and held him and you hauled off and hit him. It was a pile-driver that spattered the convict's nose and teeth into a bloody pulp, and you let go the shirt and dropped the man on the ground. Then your back was turned and you were shuffling off aimlessly with that prison lockstep shuffling walk when the guard looked your way. Prison trick. Convict's eyes that glazed the slate-gray color. Murder there in those eyes.

Bob saw that madness in the glazed slate-gray eyes of the bearded man, but he did not flinch. No fear showed in his eyes.

Albright let go his grip on the boy's red shirt and lowered his clenched fist. A cold shudder shook his big-boned gaunt frame. He pulled his sleeve across his eyes and sweaty face. His skin was the color of a dirty gray blanket.

"I ain't used to it," he muttered in a croaking voice.

He meant he wasn't used to hearing laughter that wasn't flat and taunting. Only the prison guards ever laughed, and theirs was a brutal sadistic humor. Convicts didn't laugh. Not unless one of them went stir-crazy and blew his top, and let his maniacal laughter fill the stone-walled steel-barred prison corridors.

Bob was looking at him now and there was no laughter in his blue eyes. He knew that this gaunt, bearded man with the cold merciless eyes was Big Jim Albright. Albright had gotten out of prison and had come back. Bob had sense enough not to put it into words.

"There's grub at the cabin," he said. "You won't have to go near the sheep wagon. I'll have this band of sheep off by sundown. I was laughin' at myself—a darned sheepherdin' kid playin' cowboy, ropin' sagebrush. You caught me at it, and then you told me to pick up that fancy gun and it struck me funny the way I must look—dressed up in fancy cowboy duds and packing a fancy gun. I don't know how to use.

"You move in here. When I get my sheep camped this evenin' off your range, I'll come back and move the sheep wagon. This is the first time there's been any sheep camped here. It's the last sheep

that'll louse up your range, I swear it.

"My father turned the Albright place over to me, and I've looked after it myself. But all the time I told myself I was just sort of keepin' the place up till Jim Albright got back. The stuff Albright left behind is still there in the cabin stored away—his bedroll and all his personal belongin's. Nobody's laid a hand on anything. Albright's home ranch is still his so far as I'm concerned. A hard rain and a strong wind and the sheep stink will be gone."

BOB leaned down from his saddle and picked up his gun and shoved it into its fancy holster. He started to ride after his band of sheep.

The bearded man watched him riding away. He had thrown away his trust in mankind. Trust and friendship had been replaced by hatred. Five years in prison had done things to Jim Albright. The hurt was deep and raw inside him. He had no friendship for that boy riding away. No thanks. No gratitude. It was a sort of wolfish cunning now that tempered his bitter hatred. He'd come back to kill the three Lothian brothers and a man named Jerry Malone. And that thought prompted him to ride after Bob Forbes.

He overtook the boy and rode alongside him for a ways in silence. When he spoke he talked like a convict in the prison yard where conversation is forbidden—without any movement of his lips, and his voice low-pitched and toneless.

"How big a sheep outfit has Angus Forbes got?"

"Ten bands. He bought out the Swedes that ran sheep next to the Ace of Diamonds. The Lothian brothers were dealin' the Swede sheepmen plenty of misery and they sold out cheap. Angus Forbes bought 'em out, land, water rights, sheep, lock stock and barrel, at his own figure."

Forbes gave the bearded man a faint grin. "Angus Forbes is Scotch. And a Scotchman drives a canny bargain. Aye, Angus Forbes is a true Scot."

Then a hardness tightened the corners of the boy's grin and his eyes lost something of their bright blue sparkle.

"The Lothians went to a lot of trouble to scare the Swedes into sellin' out. They

sent Malone, their ramrod, to buy out the Swedes when they got ready to sell. But Angus beat Malone to the deal.

"Since then it's been trouble. The Ace of Diamonds never misses a chance to deal misery to the sheep outfit. Angus runs his sheep inside his own boundary lines, and he has half a dozen line riders.

"The line riders pack saddle guns. The man in charge of the line riders is Tex Cutter and he wears a special deputy sheriff badge. That puts the law on our side."

Something in Albright's cold eyes silenced young Bob.

"Don't it?" he asked, doubt and uncertainty in his voice.

"Any man kin wear a law badge," said Jim Albright. "Angus Forbes got that special deputy's badge from the sheriff. He hired Cutter for a tough hand and pinned that law badge on him. Cutter hired his own hand-picked crew of line riders?"

Bob nodded and shifted uneasily in his saddle. The bearded man was looking at the youth's white angora chaps and silver-mounted spurs and saddle carbine and pearl-handled six-shooter. Forbes grinned uneasily.

"Cutter helped me pick 'em out of the mail order catalog," he said with a half-defiant defense. "Tex has got chaps like these and a red flannel shirt and a six-shooter like mine. Cutter is—"

"Yeah. I've heard of Tex Cutter."

"If it wasn't for Cutter and his law badge, the Ace of Diamonds woulda over-run our range. His line riders held 'em back. Tex has been in more than one range war. The Lothian brothers and Malone might be tough but they haven't the guts to tackle Cutter and his line riders!"

The bearded man from the Deer Lodge pen let it ride in silence. It was plain enough that young Forbes was patterning himself after his tough gun-slinging hero Tex Cutter.

"One of these times," young Bob broke an uneasy silence, "we'll git rid of these stinkin' blattin' sheep and stock the range with cattle. Tex says we'll make it really tough on the Ace of Diamonds."

"Angus Forbes, is a sheepman. He won't sell his sheep because there's big

money in sheep. The only way anybody kin ever put Angus out of the sheep business is to kill him. Cutter tells you any different, he's a liar."

Chapter II

THE LOCO SHEEPER

JIM ALBRIGHT had told himself over and over again while he was in prison that he would never again trust any human being. But he had to put some sort of trust now in young Forbes.

For one thing, Bob had recognized him as Jim Albright. But the young sheepherder wasn't lying when he said he'd stored away Albright's bedroll and personal belongings. The boy had a streak of hero-worship mixed in with his youthful dreams of being a wild cowboy, and he was telling the truth about holding this ranch in trust. And the man had to credit the boy with that. The best bet was to tell Bob the truth.

"There's no use denyin' it. I'm Albright. I got let out of the pen before I served my full stretch. But till the news leaks out, I don't want nobody to know. I made that kind of a deal with the warden. He owed it to me. I helped him put down a convict riot. It was a prison break and I saved the warden from gettin' killed.

"And I held him to the promise I got outa him. We both got cut up and shot and spent a few weeks in the hospital. When we got out of the hospital I held the warden to his end of the bargain. Nobody knows I got turned loose. I've got my job cut out. I aim to do that job. I'd have to kill you right here an' now if I figgered you'd tell anybody I'm here. You understand?"

"I understand. But that ain't the reason I'll keep my mouth shut." There was no fear in Bob's blue eyes. "You got a dirty deal," he went on. "Now you come back to fight it out with the Ace of Diamonds. You kin trust me."

Bob was holding out his hand. There was a solemn look on his sunburnt face and in his eyes. It was a very youthful gesture but Albright did not smile. He had been like that once before prison had killed the youth inside him. And he knew that young Forbes was pledging absolute

trust to him, because Bob was honest.

Albright never thought he would ever again grip the hand of anyone in any sort of friendship. But he shook hands gravely now with young Bob. And he saw the blue eyes light up.

"You tell me what to do," said Bob. "I'll do it."

"You say somebody ran off your sheepherder."

"They ran him off or killed him. It's a penitentiary offense for a sheepherder to quit his band of sheep."

"So I've heard. Well, you've hired a sheepherder."

"Huh?" Bob grunted like the man kicked in the belly.

Albright grinned a twisted, bitter grin. "Show me how to handle a band of sheep. We'll keep that sheep camp here for awhile. Nobody in the cow country would believe it even if they saw it with their own eyes. Jim Albright herdin' sheep.

He wasn't thirty years old, but he'd turned iron gray. He had lost forty-fifty pounds. With his hair uncut and a beard grown he was well disguised. Herding a band of sheep would complete that disguise.

"Sheepherders is all supposed to be kinda locoed. After that stretch in the pen it ain't too hard to be locoed. All you got to do is hire me to herd a band of sheep. That lets you out."

"Gosh," Bob said. "Big Jim Albright herdin' sheep! You can't mean that. It's a—a disgrace!"

THE ghost of a smile had twitched a corner of the man's bearded mouth.

"Some folks consider it a disgrace bein' sent to the pen," he told the boy. "Yeah. They say a convict is lower than a sheepherder."

"I didn't mean it that way. Bein' sent to the pen is no disgrace. You take outlaws like Jesse James and the Daltons and the Hole in the Wall Gang and the Wild Bunch, robbin' banks and holdin' up trains. Some of 'em have been in and outa the pen and nobody considers it any disgrace.

"But herdin' sheep!"

"Once a man gits used to the sheep stink and the blattin'," Albright grinned, "it won't be bad. Roundsidin' on a hill, and ketch up with the sunlight, that can

mebbyso git the knots and kinks out a man's system. It might be good medicine for five years in the pen."

Albright was half joshing, half in earnest. He needed the healing sun and the free clean fresh air and sleep under the stars. With the lazy job of herding sheep he'd get back the feel of the earth and the knowledge that he was free.

"You know what I did when I got outa the Deer Lodge pen? I rode all that first day through the Deer Lodge Valley, puttin' all the long miles I could between it and me. I camped that night where there was feed and water for my horse. When I unsaddled and picketed my horse I got down on all fours and ate green grass.

"Nothin' ever tasted sweeter than that green grass along the crick bank. Sounds locoed and mebbyso it was a little crazy. But I ate grass and I skinned off my clothes and went swimmin' in the crick. I stayed in the cold water till I was cold and goose-pimpled and numb, and then I come outa the water and I rolled in the tall grass till my hide was dried and warm.

"That was a long day's ride and I shoulda gone to sleep. The sleep wouldn't come because I couldn't shut my eyes that long. I had to watch them millions of stars and the moon. It was daybreak, and then sunrise, and I was plumb free.

"It wasn't till later on that day I remembered I hadn't had nothin' to eat but a mouthful of green grass and that I was hungry and empty bellied. I fell hungry now, young Bob. I don't remember when or where I had my last bait of grub."

Bob would have let Albright ride alone to his cabin. But the man said if the two dogs could tend to the sheep the two of 'em would ride down together. And anyhow, they'd better scout around some and cut for sign of the missing sheepherder.

The cabin was like he had left it and young Bob showed him his JIM ALBRIGHT carved deep with a jack knife blade on the inside of the door.

"I'd look at it," grinned Bob, "and try to figure out what you looked like. But I couldn't. Because that name carved there was like a bald-faced kid like me would carve his name, and you was the notorious Big Jim Albright. And it didn't fit."

"I was purty much of a kid when I whittled my name there. But I got that

kid stuff drug outa me in the big pen."

Albright turned and walked out of the log cabin and over to the giant cottonwood, as if he had remembered something he'd left there. He had the big blade of his new jack knife open. Then he saw the scarred bark, a space as big as a man's hand, where somebody had whittled away the initials he had carved there years ago. The Initials J.A., and below them the initials G.L. for Gail Lothian. He had planned in his dreams to fetch Gail here for his bride, and he'd show her their initials carved deep in the bark of the giant old cottonwood.

Now he was going to cut away that bark and wipe out the last mark of that shattered dream. But somebody had already done that.

He stood there with his jack knife blade open staring at the scarred bark.

"I cut that bark away." Young Forbes spoke quietly behind him.

Albright snapped the blade of his knife shut and he turned slowly around and looked at Bob. Bob grinned uncertainly.

"You ain't such a kid," said Albright, "after all."

Then they heard the brush moving and Albright's six-shooter was in his hand. With his other hand he shoved Bob back behind the big tree trunk. He stood there, crouched a little, the gun in his hand, his slate gray eyes cold and merciless.

THE man who stumbled and staggered and pawing his way through the brush was crusted with dried mud and the mud caked on his naked hide. He had no clothes on, nor hat nor shoes nor boots. He was bearded and long-haired and there was a wild scared look in his blood-shot eyes. He looked like a crazy man and his voice croaked out in an unintelligible gibberish.

Albright stared at the man, his gun lowering. He heard Bob call this mud-crusted thing by name and then he knew this was the missing sheepherder.

"It's Swen," said Bob. "He went with the sheep my father bought from the Swedes. He's always been kinda loco, but I didn't think he'd ever go this wild."

"Swen!" Bob called to the mud-caked herder. "What ails you, Swen?"

The sheepherder had taken one look at

Albright and the six-shooter, let out a croaking scream, and started to run away. He tripped and went down and lay there, making horrible ugly sounds as he began crawling along on his belly into the high willows.

Bob got him and talked to him and the sound of the boy's voice calmed the sheepherder and brought some sanity back. The boy motioned Albright back and Albright stepped back into the cabin out of sight.

It took a while to get the caked mud off.

The sheepherder's bare hide was welted and torn where somebody had tied him up and quirted him. Bob rubbed carbolic salve into the raw welts. He left the herder inside the canvas-topped sheep wagon and told Albright what had happened.

"They rode up on his camp at night. They yanked him outa bed and tied his hands high and worked him over with doubled ropes and quirts. They had their neck handkerchiefs pulled up over their faces. They scattered his sheep and cut him down and ran him off. He crawled into the mud and stayed there. He's in bad shape. His mind is about gone—what there was of it—and he's sick and hurt. I've got to take him to the ranch in the buckboard. Swen was as harmless as the sheep he herded. Damn 'em! This is worse than murder."

"The Ace of Diamonds? The Lothian boys and their ramrod Jerry Malone?"

"Swen keeps saying the same name over and over—Tex Cutter. That don't make sense."

"Don't it, Bob?"

"Swen's gone plumb loco. Cutter and his line riders are the men paid to protect our sheep and the sheepherders."

"Yeah. Hook up your team and take your sheepherder to the ranch, Bob. Tell your father you got a-holt of another sheepherder. Tell that to Cutter if he's there. But don't tell no more than that. Before you pull out, leave me that saddle gun of yours and all the .30-30 cartridges you got to fit it.

"You're the camptender. In a week or ten days you fetch me a caddy of Bull Durham and all the news you kin gather. Keep your ears cocked and your eyes peeled and your mouth shut. Savvy?"

Bob Forbes nodded.

"Tell 'em at the ranch that this pore Swen sheepherder went loco and quit his hand. And how the coyotes and wolves scattered his sheep. And how finally this loco sheepherder turned up without no clothes on, plumb gone in the head.

"But don't let on to nobody that you even suspicion them night riders did the job. Now git that loco sheepherder to the ranch. And don't show up here for a week. Now I'd best git back to tendin' my woollies."

Jim Albright's bearded grin had a lopsided twist.

Chapter III

RIDERS IN THE NIGHT

JIM ALBRIGHT, sheepherder on horseback. He grinned to himself and went over in his mind the things young Bob had said about herding a band of sheep.

Twelve head of sheep wore sheep bells, and while the sheep scattered to graze you got a count on those belled sheep. If there was one missing you took along the dogs and the dogs would locate the belled sheep and perhaps a dozen or twenty head more that had grazed away from the main band.

The same way with the black sheep. There were ten black sheep in the band—born that color. They were used as markers. A herder kept a range count on his black sheep the same as he kept tally on the bell sheep. Miss a black sheep and you made a hunt for it and the others in the little strayed bunch.

And a sheepherder, Albright figured, was like a cowhand. A sheepherder depended on his sheep-dogs the same as a cowboy depended on the cowhorse he was riding. These two shepherd dogs were well-trained and wise. Friendly.

It had been a long time since Albright had petted a dog, longer still, since he'd had one. He liked dogs, and the two shepherd dogs were intelligent and friendly, and when Bob told them to stay with Albright, they stayed. And their eyes looked at him and they waited for him to tell them what to do.

A wave of the arm was all the signal

they needed. They knew what to do. A short wave and one of them would start around the grazing sheep. If he wanted the sheep bunched he waved the dog plumb around or sent out both dogs to work in opposite directions. They worked like cowboys bunching a day herd to move it onto a night bedground.

While the sheep grazed the dogs would lie on the ground near the shepherd. These working shepherds became the man's companions. For Albright the companionship of these two dogs was far more welcome than the companionship of any man or any woman on earth.

A man could trust a good dog. A dog gave its friendship and loyalty without thought of reward or payment. There was a depth of honesty in the brown eyes of these two shepherds that Jim Albright never hoped to see in the eyes of any man again—or in the eyes of any woman.

The eyes of Gail Lothian had haunted his dark nights in prison for many months. They were green as water reflecting sunlight when she smiled, green as winter ice.

Now Albright remembered only the coldness in the green eyes of the golden haired Gail Lothian. Anything like fool's love he had once held in his heart had turned to bitterness. Because she had cheated and lied, Albright figured all women should be treated with contempt. Women were liars.

But a dog was a friend. The eyes of a dog held the truth and loyalty a man would never see in the eyes of a woman.

Shepherding was good medicine. They didn't blat as much as he figured they would. The only sound was the tinkle of the sheep bells as they grazed. Their smell of greasy wool was gone in the clean breeze.

As the sheep were grazing and he lazed on the ground, both dogs growled and whined and were on their feet, whimpering uneasily. Shepherd dogs are not fighting dogs. Their job is to herd sheep. You couldn't sic them on a man as you'd sic a trained watchdog.

Albright sighted a couple of men on horseback, headed towards the grazing sheep. He got to his feet and mounted his horse. His hand on the stock of the carbine in its saddle scabbard.

"Here," he told himself, "is where Jim Albright turns loco sheepherder."

The men were riding together and towards him, traveling at a running walk. At that same gait, Jim Albright, sheepherder, began riding away from them, keeping the big band of sheep between himself and the two riders. The two shepherd dogs tagged along behind his horse. He circled the scattered band of grazing sheep and the two horsebackers following him.

"Hold on!" shouted one of the riders. "Hold on. We wanta talk to you. We're line riders from the Forbes ranch. Pull up, Shep. You deaf?"

Albright grinned mirthlessly and rode on without giving any indication he heard.

Once, years ago, when he'd sighted one of the Swedes' bands of sheep grazing too near his range, Albright's temper had gotten saw-edged from following that Swede sheepherder on horseback around his band of woolies. And then Albright had done just the thing the pair of horsebackers now started to do. He had started to ride through the band of sheep.

NOW Albright did just what that Swede sheepherder had done that day. He slid his saddle carbine from its scabbard.

To ride through a band of sheep is to break one of the unwritten laws of the sheep range. And right now Albright turned sheepherder.

He calculated the distance as three hundred yards. He raised his rear sight to the three hundred yard notch and squinted along the sights and pulled the trigger. Then before the echoes of the shot had died he levered a fresh cartridge into the breech and fired a second shot.

He sent those two .30-30 bullets whining so close to the hats of the line riders that each of them ducked.

Albright remembered a smattering of Sioux language he had picked up on the reservation, and he strung it out into a meaningless jibberish and shouted it wildly at the two riders. Just to prove that the first two shots hadn't been lucky accidents, Albright sent two more bullets whining above their hats.

That did it. That pair of line riders might be tough, but they had no stomach for tackling a loco sheepherder who could

shoot—and shoot pretty accurate at that.

They whirled their horses and rode away at a high lope, looking back across their shoulders. And Jim Albright, sheepherder, was again riding around his band of sheep with his two sheep dogs following his horse, and his horse traveling no faster than a shuffling running walk.

That pair of line riders were headed for the sheep ranch. They would tell it scary to Tex Cutter when they got there. Albright hoped that Bob Forbes would be there to hear it, and that the boy would have the savvy to play his hand out. Somehow Albright had a notion that young Bob wouldn't fail him. A liking for that young Scot was creeping into the ex-convict who had vowed never to trust any man.

That evening at sundown Albright got a count on his bell sheep and blacksheep markers, and found them all there. His two dogs bunched the sheep on their bed-ground in the twilight. He filled and lit two lanterns and set them out, putting up the two ragged scarecrows. The lanterns and scarecrows were to keep away prowling coyotes and wolves.

He cooked and ate supper in the covered sheep wagon. Shortly after dark he blew out the lantern light inside the canvas-topped sheep wagon. He shut the door of the wagon and left it.

Albright got his horse and rode off into the night. He took the two shepherd dogs along and carried his saddle gun in the crook of his left arm as he rode off into the night. As he rode he kept to the shadow of the high willows.

About half a mile from the sheep camp and about that distance from his ranch, Albright dismounted. He unsaddled and picketed his horse, then lay down on the ground and the two shepherd dogs lay down beside him.

There was the unwritten law of the range that a sheepherder stay with his band of sheep day or night, in all weather.

It was a penitentiary offence, young Bob had said, for a sheepherder to quit his band of sheep. But Albright was remembering what had happened to the sheepherder Swen.

"I reckon I'll just have to take my sheepherder chance on bein' sent to the pen," he told the two dogs curled up on either side of him.

Albright slept with his boots off. His six-shooter and saddle gun were handy. He knew that the two dogs would wake him up at the slightest sound of any prowler.

Sometime between midnight and dawn he woke up. The cold wet muzzles of both dogs were touching his face, and their low whimperings were warnings.

Chapter IV

GUN-HERDER ON HORSEBACK

ALBRIGHT pulled his boots on and buckled on his cartridge belt and six-shooter. The two dogs stopped their low whimpering when he touched their heads. But they were uneasy and he knew the shepherds wanted to be back with their sheep. Those sheep were in danger—maybe of a lone wolf or a coyote pack on the prowl or a mountain lion.

But it was bright moonlight and Albright could see the sheep bedded there on the gentle slope of a hill—a gray patch, motionless and quiet, bedded down. The two lanterns showed like two orange blobs. The two ragged scarecrow figures cast big shadows on the ground. And there on the bank of the creek and a stone's throw from the bedded sheep stood the canvas covered sheep wagon.

Everything was quiet and peaceful and silent. Albright lost something of that first tautness he'd had when he came wide awake. Any prowling varmint—even a skunk or rambling porcupine—could have roused alarm in the two shepherds. Albright saddled his horse and untied the horsehair hackamore rope from the end of the catch-rope. He stood there beside his saddled horse and stared at the bedded sheep and the canvas topped sheep wagon. He was undecided as to whether or not to ride the half mile to the camp for a look-around. He was looking at the sheep wagon when it burst into flame.

A man had slipped from the high willows along the creek, saturated the high wagon box with kerosene. The door of the sheep wagon was made in two halves, like a Dutch door. The canvas upper half could be swung back and the lower wooden half stayed latched in place. The man who had poured the kerosene over the

door of the covered wagon had latched the door with its hasp and staple and wired it shut before he touched a match to the kerosene-soaked wood and canvas. It would have been a fiery death for any luckless shepherd asleep on his bunk inside the sheep wagon.

In no more than a few seconds the sheep wagon was enclosed in flames. The man who had set fire to it ran back into the brush. Then he came out on horseback. With him were three more men. The four of them circled the burning sheep wagon like four warpath Indians, yelling, shooting into the blazing wagon as they spurred their horses to a run.

The sheep, terrified by the sudden blaze and the shooting, were up on their feet, blatting, jangling their sheep bells.

Cattle stampede when spooked, but sheep huddle and pile up and smother to death in the pileup. Sheep are cowardly and fear does that to a band.

Albright was forking his horse now, his saddle carbine in his hand. Slung from his saddle horse was a filled cartridge sack made from a boot top. It was filled with .30-30 cartridges. Albright motioned the two frightened dogs back to the heels of his horse. Keeping to the shadows of the high willow brush along the creek he rode towards the burning wagon at a long high trot. From under the low-pulled brim of his hat his eyes were as cold slate gray as a winter sky.

He wasn't even breathing heavily when he reined up within an easy hundred yards of the burning sheep wagon. Its high blaze threw out an ugly glare. Its reflection pointed up the four men on horseback who rode around the burning wagon at a run, emptying their guns into what they figured was a murderous, blazing death trap.

This was arson and there was murder in their hearts. It was a hellish spectacle, even to a man who had seen the brutalities of prison convicts and tough prison guards. . . .

Albright rode a gun-broke horse. He dropped his knotted bridle reins over his saddle horn and shifted his weight to his left stirrup. He raised his saddle carbine. The gun barrel moved a little as he got one of the riders lined in his gun sights. He pulled the trigger.

THE rider's yelling was cut short. He jerked convulsively in his saddle and his arms were flung wide. He let go his gun and pitched headlong from his running horse.

Albright levered the empty shell from his saddle gun, levered a fresh cartridge into the breech, lined his sights on a second rider, and squeezed the trigger.

It was deadly, cold-blooded, steady-handed marksmanship. The sound of his gun blotted out the din of the guns of the night riders, and the crackling blaze of the burning sheep wagon.

Those four night riders had been swilling down enough booze to give them guts for their job of arson and murder. They were drunk now on booze and the lust to kill. They paid no attention to the first of their four who pitched off his horse as if he'd lost his balance. His horse, empty stirrups flapping, followed the horse and rider ahead.

It was the rider behind who realized that something had gone wrong. He let out a yell. Albright's second shot tore into his heart and cut the yell off, and he went over backwards. One foot hung in the stirrup, and his spooked horse pitched and kicked at the dragging limp dead body.

The other two night riders saw it at the same time. One of them let out a shout. "What the hell goes on, Tex? Look!"

He waved his saddle gun at the two riderless horses and yanked his running horse to a sliding halt between the blazing wagon and the huddled, blatting, piled-up sheep.

Albright got the man in his sights and pulled the trigger. The man collapsed across his saddle horn like an empty sack.

That fourth and last rider stared wide-eyed, paralyzed. He stared at the man who toppled over from his saddle onto the ground.

Then Albright rode out from behind the high willows. He had never seen Tex Cutter. But the man he'd just shot had called out "Tex."

Albright could have killed Cutter then, as swiftly and easily as he had just shot three of those night riders to death.

Instead, he stood in his stirrups and at the top of his harsh rasping voice he shouted out a string of meaningless Sioux. Yelling, standing in his stirrups, he rode

straight at Cutter. He shot as his horse hit a run, but he shot to miss. Those .30-30 bullets ripped through the high dented crown of the man's hat and whined and zinged in the man's ears.

Cutter let out one croaking yell, then spurred his horse to a run. Albright chased him, yelling Sioux and shooting close. Bearded and hatless, shouting that jibberish, with three dead men tallied to his deadly aim, Albright played his hand out like a loco shepherd.

When he had driven Cutter into that headlong flight he knew that the line rider boss would keep traveling, and he reined up his blowing horse and shoved his saddle gun back into its scabbard.

"Carry the mail, you dirty son!" He spoke aloud, his voice toneless. "Take the bad news back to Jerry Malone and the Lothian boys. Next time you come back, fetch 'em along. Travel yonderly, Mr. Tex Cutter. I give you somethin' to tell about."

Then Albright rode back to do the things that had to be done. He had no qualms or regrets. He had killed three men who had murder in their hearts. He felt no sorrow. Neither was he elated. He had played the hand that had been dealt him.

He was not surprised to read the Ace of Diamonds brand on two of the geldings when he picked up the three saddled horses. The third horse wore the Forbes Rafter F horse brand that he'd seen on Bob Forbes' saddle horse. That clinched his hunch that Cutter and Malone were hand in glove in this sheep and cattle war.

Albright unsaddled the three horses and turned them into the little horse pasture below the barn. He put the saddles and saddle blankets and bridles in the saddle room.

He took the two dogs and went back to the band of sheep. He was uncertain just how to go about the handling of a band of badly frightened sheep so he turned the job over to the dogs. After an hour or two the sheep were spread out, and the dead sheep that had been smothered to death in the pileup were left there.

The sheep wagon had burned down to a charred, smoldering ruin. Albright took a look at the three night riders he had shot to death—two Ace of Diamonds cow-

hands. One of Cutter's line rider gun slingers. He took their guns and cartridge belts and emptied their pockets. There was nothing but jack knives and matches and tobacco.

Then Albright dug a big hole in the ground and dumped the three dead men into it and shoveled the damp earth in on top. He kept the cartridges, then left the cartridge belts and holsters and six-shooters and saddle guns with the saddles in the barn.

It was daybreak when he finished. He was dirty and sweaty and his hands were caked with grave dirt. He stripped and lay in the creek and lathered himself with strong smelling laundry soap. When he had rubbed himself dry he dug into the old tin trunk Bob Forbes had stored away in the cabin, and put on clean clothes.

Then he cooked and ate a big breakfast and washed it down with strong black coffee. He fed the two shepherd dogs all they could eat. He washed his dirty dishes and closed his cabin door. He saddled his horse and took the two dogs along and grazed his band of sheep out across the rolling prairie. Jim Albright, sheepherder on horseback.

Chapter V

THE COLOR OF BLACK JERRY MALONE

THE NEWS spread like prairiefire driven by a strong wind. The news said that there was a loco crazy sheepherder camped with a band of Forbes sheep at the Albright place. And this sheepherder was crazy, dangerous. He'd shoot anybody that topped his skyline.

Rumor said that this sheepherder had set fire to his own sheep wagon and let it burn to ashes. That he'd gone plumb wild and piled up his band of sheep. Then he'd prowled the night on horseback and would kill any man he found on his night prow.

Tex Cutter dared not call on the law for help. He dared not tell Angus Forbes anything that might make the sheepman suspicious. There at the Forbes sheep ranch the only thing Cutter could do was to say nothing.

Forbes had put Cutter in full charge of his line riders. The sheepman had no way of knowing that one of them was dead.



Cutter had raced for the Ace of Diamonds. . . .

When he had been forced into hiring Cutter and Cutter had hired his own tough crew of line riders, it behooved the sheepman to turn a deaf ear there.

Cutter had taken his bad news to the Ace of Diamonds home ranch as fast as he could ride. He and Malone and the three Lothians had gone into the ranch house and closed the door. For hours they were shut in there, drinking whiskey and smoking and making war medicine.

Then the three Lothians brothers had turned on their brother-in-law Jerry Malone, and they had cussed him out.

The three Lothians were alike as three rawhide ropes. Six footers and rawboned and lantern-jawed. Pale eyes and dirty yellow hair. A nasal twang. Tough and treacherous and greedy. Where you saw one Lothian you saw all three Lothians. They all had a yellow streak of cowardice, and it was only by their triple strength that they could overcome the cowardice in each one of them. They knew their own fear. But not even to Malone would they admit they were afraid of anything.

Cutter took his cussing out without showing fight. Hell, the Ace of Diamonds paid him enough. He could afford to take their tongue-whipping.

Not so Black Jerry Malone. Black Jerry was swarthy and black-eyed and his hair was as coarse and black as a horse's mane. He claimed to be black Irish. Malone wasn't his real name. There was no trace of Irish brogue in his voice. It sounded thick and guttural and when the black fury in him was roused and got out of control, his blasphemy frothed and belched out in the German tongue.

He took the profane abuse of the three Lothians until this fury burst out. His black eyes flamed. His thick voice filled the room.

"Dumkopfs! Verdamnter dumkopfs. Mit der dumheit! Schwein! Pig-dogs!" And the gun in his hand threatened the three Lothians.

Cutter took courage from Malone. His fancy six-shooter slid into sight. But Black Jerry turned on him, cursing him as he'd just cursed the Lothians.

"You ain't in the family, you damned bungler. Get back to your sheep outfit. Already I told you what you do. Kill Angus Forbes. Kill his son. Then come back here."

"What about that sheepherder at the Albright place?" Cutter muttered sullenly.

Black Jerry was getting his temper under control. His swarthy skin glistened with sweat, and a crafty glitter crept into his black eyes. He licked his thick lips and bared his teeth.

"Tell Angus Forbes about that crazy sheepherder. Tell him without letting him find out what happened there. Take Forbes and Bob with you. Let the crazy sheepherder kill them both. If you get killed, so much the better and damned good riddance.

"You're no more use to me till you get Forbes and his son Bob killed off. I don't give a damn how you do it. But git it done before you show up at the Ace of Diamonds again. Get out, now. Get off the ranch before somebody tells that sheepman that his line rider boss is here drinking Lothian whiskey. Git!"

WHEN Cutter was gone, Black Jerry grinned at the three Lothians—an ugly, glint-eyed wolfish grin. His fury spent, he spoke without trace of accent, and in the vernacular of the cow country.

"All in the family, eh, boys? He picked up the jug. "One big happy family. I shore married me the Ace of Diamonds. Bought a half-int'rest with a marriage license that cost me two bucks."

He gripped the jug in his left hand, his right hand on his six-shooter. His small black eyes glittering as he watched the three big Lothian brothers.

"That damn' Cutter showin' up with his scary loco sheepherder story thataway made me forget the news I fetched from town to give you Lothian brothers. Your sister Gail is dead."

"Gail? Dead?"

"Yah. Mine wife Gail. And I got it in ink on paper, signed and witnessed—her half of the Ace of Diamonds goes to her husband. To me. Even hell and the Lothian brothers can't change that."

"You're lyin', Jerry," said one of the Lothians. "Gail is strong, healthy. She's havin' the time of her life there in town.

She ain't missed a dance in years. Bein' married to you ain't changed her none. Gail's got every man in the cow country beggin' her to dance with him an' she plays the field and you're just another sucker. You're 'lyin'. That, or you've killed her. And if you've killed her, you black German—!"

Black Jerry tilted the jug and drank and licked his lips.

"Gail saved me that job. She killed herself. Poison. She took it in her coffee. Enough strychnine, the Doc said, to kill all the wolves in Montana. I had it there to put in wolf bait."

Black Jerry wasn't lying. His swarthy skin darkened now with some strong emotion that was a gloating triumph over the three Lothians.

"Why would Gail want to kill herself?"

"That's what the Sheriff asked me. She gave him a letter before she killed herself. That sealed letter had Jim Albright's name on it. She told the sheriff to give it to Albright after she was dead.

"Then she came home and made a pot of strong black coffee and put that wolf poison into the cup and stirred it and drank it, without batting them green eyes of hers. And me sittin' across the supper table from her. Gail Lothian had more guts than all three of her Lothian brothers."

"You knowed she was takin' poison?"

"Hell, yes. If she wanted it thataway, I wasn't stoppin' her."

Black Jerry had set down the jug. The six-shooter in his hand covered the three Lothian brothers. There was murder now in his beady black eyes.

"Gail meant nothin' to you three brothers. Don't try to tell me no different. You sold your sister to me so I'd send Albright to the pen. She wasn't unwilling to marry me. I'd promised her a home in town and all the good times she couldn't git while you had her here cookin' an' keepin' house for you.

"She was cold-blooded about the deal, and so was I. She owned her half int'rest in the Ace of Diamonds, but you wouldn't let her have her share of the money the outfit made. It wasn't till I married her an' throwed the law gun down on you three sons that I got her share. And me'n her split the money we got for every Ace

of Diamonds steer sold on the market. "Me'n Gail was man an' wife accordin' to law, and that was about the size of it. She had her gay times in town, dressed to the nines an' dancin' an' flirtin' with any man she taken a fancy to. And I lived my own life, accordin'.

"So don't go tryin' to shed a tear amongst you. Me'n you three Lothians kin still string our Ace of Diamonds bets together. We're after that Forbes sheep outfit now. Once we git it, we'll have the biggest outfit in the cow country. But if you want it thisaway?"

Black Jerry thumbed back his gun hammer. The six-shooter pointed at all three of the Lothian brothers.

"Put up that fool gun, Jerry. We'll all stick together. We got to. But why the hell Gail would want to kill herself when she's havin' the time of her life—I don't know."

Al Lothian spoke for them all. And for Black Jerry Malone, nobody had an answer. Not then.

THE SHERIFF had the answer to Gail Lothian Malone's suicide. It was there in the letter she had written to Jim Albright. She had put it down in bright green ink on perfumed lavender note paper. Below Jim Albright's name she had written the brief instructions:

To Be Opened After I Am Dead.

But the mucilage on the back flap of the envelope had come unstuck. And the sheriff was a man of curious disposition and unhampered by the notion it was dishonorable to slide a jack knife blade in under the back flap to help the unsticking. He took out Gail's letter and read it.

Dear Jim:

I got word that you have been pardoned out of the pen. And I know you will come back here to kill my three brothers and Black Jerry Malone. I hope you do the job without getting hurt because they railroaded you to the pen and they need killing.

I ain't any better than my Lothian brothers or the Black Jerry I married. If anything I am lower down than them. Because I let you think I was in love with you and would marry you and sometimes like right now I know that if ever I was capable of loving any one man, that man was Big Jim Albright.

And if you had asked me point blank to

marry you I would have done so. But you was too bashful. And then Black Jerry Malone come along and he made a deal with my three Lothian brothers to frame you on a cattle rustling charge, and he could do it because he was stock inspector. And Jerry promised to get me my half share of the Ace of Diamonds away from my brothers. And Black Jerry kept his word.

If I had stood up in court and told the truth about that deal, the judge and jury would have turned you loose then and there. But I wanted the town life Black Jerry promised me. And I sat there and let them send you to the pen. And I saw what was in your eyes when you looked at me. You hated me and despised me and there was hate and contempt in your eyes when you looked at me while the Judge sentenced you to fifteen years in the pen.

Now you are out of the pen. You will be showing up here. And I am ashamed to meet you. Scared to see that look of contempt in your eyes. While you spent five years in the pen I had my five years' fling. Silks and satins and high-heeled red slippers and I ain't missed a dance in those five years. Now I am going to pay the fiddler. Nobody is to blame for what I am going to do. I am sane and in my right mind. This is how I want it. And I am not afraid to die.

I had a will made out and signed and witnessed. It leaves my half of the Ace of Diamonds to Jim Albright. That is a dirty trick to play on Black Jerry. But not as dirty as the trick he played on you when he sent you to the pen.

I know that looks like I am trying to buy your forgiveness and maybe I am. I don't know. And I don't know what that long stretch in prison has done to you. But when I die I will take with me the hope that when you get this letter you will forgive.—Gail Lothian.

P. S. I know right now as I write these words that I Love You, Jim.

The sheriff must have felt a little guilty then. He put the letter back into its envelope and glued down the flap. He shoved the letter into a pigeonhole in his rolltop desk. If Big Jim Albright was out of the pen, he would show up in town. He'd give him the letter. It sounded like Gail was planning to kill herself and he'd better see if he couldn't talk her out of it.

Gail was dead when the sheriff got there. Black Jerry said she'd drunk poison in her coffee. It was the sheriff's job to call the coroner and he did and the letter with Albright's name on it wasn't mentioned. But the big pot-bellied sheriff, who was more petty politician than he was an actual peace officer, dropped a casual remark.

"You and them Lothian boys better be on the lookout for the Big Jim Albright you sent to the pen, Jerry. Albright's bin pardoned out."

Black Jerry had flinched like he'd been quirted across the face. But he'd recovered quickly. Later, when he took the news of Gail's death to the Ace of Diamonds ranch, Black Jerry kept the news of Jim Albright's freedom to himself.

Let Albright come back and kill the three Lothian boys where he found 'em. That was fine by Black Jerry. It'd save him the trouble of wiping out the three Lothian brothers. . . . And when the sign was right he, Black Jerry Malone, would bushwhack Big Jim Albright. Bust Albright's back with a bullet.

And Black Jerry kept the news of Albright's freedom to himself, but his cunning brain was clicking when he talked the three Lothians into going with him.

"Anyhow," Black Jerry said, "we'd orter git them damned woolies off the Albright place before it's wrecked for grazin' cattle when we git a-holt of it for the Ace of Diamonds."

If Black Jerry made any connection in his mind between the crazy sheepherder and the return of Big Jim Albright, he said nothing. He let the three Lothian brothers ride on ahead when they rode over to the Albright place. They were about a mile from the Albright ranch when they heard the sound of shooting.

Chapter VI

DEATH PLAYS A LOCO SHEEPER!

BIG JIM ALBRIGHT and his two shepherd dogs were fetching the band of sheep in to the ranch at sundown when he heard the sound of shots in the distance. He slid his saddle gun from its scabbard and called the dogs and rode out of sight into the high willows along the creek.

It wasn't long until a lone rider came into view. Even at a distance he recognized young Bob, armed, and riding like the devil was at his heels.

Albright rode out to meet him. Young Bob looked pale under his sunburnt skin, and there was a stark sick look in his blue eyes.

"Tex Cutter killed my father. He shot Angus Forbes in the back! He wanted to kill me but I killed him instead. I shot him, Jim! I killed Tex Cutter! I'd kill him again if he was still alive. My father's dead. Cutter murdered Angus Forbes, but I killed Tex Cutter."

Young Bob was torn inside by grief, and he kept repeating it over and over. It was a while before Albright got the boy calmed down.

The sheepherder Swen had died. But before he died he had told Angus Forbes it was Tex Cutter and Black Jerry and the three Lothians who had abused him. The sheepman had questioned his son. Bob had told his father that Albright had taken the sheepherder Swen's band of sheep.

"I had to tell my father, Jim. And he never told anybody. But we watched Cutter. But we didn't watch him close enough.

"Before the three of us left the ranch," continued young Bob, "my father sent my sister Jean to town after the sheriff. Jean was the only one at the ranch we could trust with the message. My father sent Jean to tell the sheriff to gather a big posse and get here to the home ranch fast."

Then Bob pointed towards the four horsebackers just coming into sight. "Maybe that's the Sheriff and some of his men, now."

Albright studied the four riders awhile—the three in the lead, the one riding a short ways behind the three. His slate gray eyes were bleak. His bearded lips flattened back to bare his big white teeth.

"Them's the three Lothian brothers and Black Jerry Malone." He turned to look at young Bob.

"Hightail it!" Albright's voice sounded gritty. "You'll only be underfoot here. Git for home!"

The eyes of young Bob met those bleak slate-gray eyes without flinching. And they were bright blue and cold as clear ice.

"I just killed Tex Cutter," young Bob's voice was brittle. "I can kill another man, just as easy. Angus Forbes would want me to side you. He was on his way here to give you back your ranch and shake your hand. I won't be underfoot."

"Then stay. But when I give orders,

you take 'em. They ain't sighted us. You ride in behind the brush and leave your horse. Make your stand from inside the cabin. Don't make a target of yourself. Shoot any man that tries to charge. And good luck. I'm playin' loco sheepherder now."

Albright rode out of the brush with the two shepherd dogs and rode around the band of sheep. His saddle carbine was slung across the front of his saddle. But he did not ride away from these riders as he'd ridden away from the two line riders. He headed around the band of sheep and towards the three Lothians and Black Jerry.

The three rawboned Lothian brothers pulled up, and their saddle guns slid into sight.

Black Jerry would have ridden away, but one of the Lothians called him. Their three saddle guns pointed at Black Jerry's belly.

"Git up here, Jerry, where you kin take a hand."

"Don't coyote on me, Jerry," shouted Albright. "Remember me? Big Jim Albright!"

THERE was a hush. For a long moment it was so silent that the echoes of Jim Albright's shouted words were flung back. Like a lull before the storm. And then that storm broke with a crash.

The three Lothians shot at almost the same instant. And their .30-30 bullets whined past Albright's head. Black Jerry took a split-second advantage and raked his spur rowels deep. He jumped his horse to a run and lay low along the neck of his running horse. It would be impossible to shoot the man without hitting the horse. Albright had all he could do right now to swap shots with the Lothian brothers—the odds three to one.

At that distance Albright couldn't tell the three Lothians apart. Nor did it make any difference. He spurred his horse to a lope and stood in his stirrups and timed each shot he fired as he rode at them.

Time was when Big Jim Albright had been the best shot in that part of the country. Five years in the pen without a gun in his hand had not robbed him of his natural knack for it. He was cold-nerved and deadly, and inside him was that bitter

hatred that had at long last found its outlet.

He was not taking aim. Not once did he line his sights, nor did the saddle carbine stock ever lift to the height of his shoulder. He was using that saddle gun like a six-shooter. He saw one of the three Lothian brothers drop his gun and claw at his wounded guts with both hands, screaming. Gut-shot and dying in his saddle, his horse rearing and lunging, the wounded Lothian was thrown and lay there doubled up on the ground, holding his bullet riddled guts.

Albright gut-shot his second Lothian and saw him sway drunkenly in the saddle. Then a .30-30 bullet cut a deep rip in Albright's left shoulder. But he gritted his teeth and never slacked his running horse as he shoved fresh cartridges into the magazine of the Winchester.

It was Al Lothian who was left and he would have cut and run for it. But Jim Albright was coming at him at a run now. He yelled out.

"Stand your hand, Al. Don't rabbit on me or I'll shoot you in the back!"

Al Lothian had no choice now. He lifted his saddle gun and began shooting as fast as he could lever his gun and squeeze the trigger.

Albright felt the burning thudding rip of another .30-30 bullet. Then he shot Al Lothian through the belly and it doubled him over. Albright's next bullet tore through Al's skull and his head lobbed and his rawboned frame sagged and toppled. Al Lothian was dead when he hit the ground.

A .30-30 saddle gun cracked over behind the brush. The steel-jacketed bullet creased Albright's skull, and he pitched headlong onto the ground and lay there motionless.

Albright didn't hear the crack of Bob Forbes' saddle gun. He didn't see Black Jerry Malone stiffen and jerk in his saddle and go over backwards. The bullet that had creased his skull had knocked Albright out cold.

The two dogs were licking his face when he came alive. His eyes blinked open against a throbbing pain, and he saw the two shepherd dogs and heard them whimper. Then he heard a dry choked sob and he saw Bob Forbes squatted there.

But the two shepherd dogs knew that the man was alive and wasn't going to die, and their busy tails wagged.

Bob let out a sort of gasping grunt. His eyes shone. Albright asked him what become of Black Jerry Malone.

"I got 'im, Jim. He was bushed up near the cabin. He waited till you'd killed the three Lothians, then he took a pot-shot at you. Me, I waited too darned long, like a hunter with buck fever. Then I cut down on Black Jerry, and I got 'im. I reckon it's just as well I stayed."

But Albright did not flatter the boy with thanks. He scowled and blinked his eyes against the pain.

"I hope you don't. I hope you don't git—git tough, Bob. You're too clean a boy to . . ." Then his eyes closed and he lay back.

JIM ALBRIGHT came alive again. For a while he had a notion that he was back in the Deer Lodge pen, locked up in his dark cell, and that he was having one of those nightmare dreams with Gail Lothian there looking at him and smiling. And she was calling his name.

"Jim. Jim."

But her eyes were not green. They were gray-blue and tear-dimmed. Her hair was a dark red. Her voice had the hint of a Scottish burr and she looked like young Bob Forbes.

"It's Jean, my sister Jean, Jim. She'll nurse you until you're well."

Jim Albright looked up at Jean Forbes and she was bending over him and holding a glass of water to his mouth. Her other arm was in behind his shoulders and head.

"We want you to get well, Jim." Her voice was gentle and sincere and truthful. "Bob and I need you. Bob thinks you are the finest man on earth. We—I want you to get well, Jim."

No hint of coquetry. No teasing lie in this girl's eyes or her smile or the sound of her voice. Jean was as truthful and honest as the boy who was her brother.

Pain slipped away from Albright and he grinned for the first time in five years. "I'm already well," he said.

"I'm glad." Jean lowered her head and kissed him.

Bob let the two shepherd dogs in and

the dogs came as quietly as human beings coming into a sick room. Two cold wet muzzles came against Jim Albright's face—two pairs of brown shepherd dog eyes. Jim rubbed their ears and they muzzled closer, tails wagging.

He had more than that. The sheriff who had gotten there with Jean after the shooting was all over, told Albright that the Ace of Diamonds outfit was bound to go to Albright. Five years in prison was the price Albright had paid for that cow outfit.

The sheriff handed Albright the letter from Gail. He told him how she'd died. They left the wounded man alone to read the letter.

Then when he had read it, Albright called to Jean and Bob. He told Jean to read the letter Gail had written. And when they had read it Jean looked at Albright, and found forgiveness there in his eyes.

Albright had Bob get his shaving outfit. He said mebbysso it was time he came out from behind this brush. But it was Jean who lathered his face and shaved him and trimmed his uncut hair. She nicked his jaw a couple of times and stopped the blood trickle with cigarette paper stuck on.

The haircut was a little choppy in places. She stood back and with her red head cocked sideways looked him over. Then she smiled and nodded. It was meant for a little joke, and it was—until their eyes met and held and the color slowly flooded Jean's cheeks.

In the slate-gray eyes of Jim Albright she saw all that there was inside a man who was giving her the love he had tried to kill within himself. Then Jean did not use any woman's wiles. She went down on her knees there beside his bunk, and her hands went out to him, and she knelt there as if she might be praying.

He took her face in his hands and kissed her. Her lips were moving and warm against his mouth. Maybe it was some sort of a prayer, for it found its way into the heart of Jim Albright. They both knew what they had salvaged and found, and together they would build it into something that had been blessed by an Almighty God.

THE END



The whizz of the slug
buzzed by Guthrie's cheek.

Rangers Keep Out!

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

DAN GUTHRIE rode into Amityville at sundown, ranger badge pinned to his shirt and sixgun loose in its holster at his thigh. It had been a long, hard trail, and Dan, though accustomed to the quirks of manhunting, thought it odd that the end should be at such a peaceful place.

He'd passed through Amityville a year ago, found it to be the most respectable of communities. It boasted a church, a

Ranger Dan Guthrie knew murderous Black Matt Ketch had holed up in the nester town of Amityville. . . . Why, then, did every honest citizen turn a cold shoulder to Guthrie, and risk his life to cover that half-mad, ruthless killer?

schoolhouse, a town hall, and its one saloon was a quiet gathering-place without professional gamblers or percentage girls.

Amityville was the heart of a farming district—a nester town. And why Black Matt Ketch should hole up there was a mystery to Texas Ranger Dan Guthrie.

Dan was certain that the outlaw was in the town. Back a ways, he had met a freighter who told him, "Yeah, I saw a hombre like that. Your description fits him. Scar across his left cheek. Rides a blue roan horse. He was on a drunk when I saw him, yesterday."

The freighter had seen Black Matt in Amityville.

Dan took it slow, riding in. And wary. He knew that Black Matt Ketch wouldn't submit to arrest. The man would go for his gun, if given half a chance. Close to the edge of town, Dan saw a heap of charred debris that was still smoking. It was a fire-gutted house, burned to its stone foundation. It must have gone up in flames not long before, just that day or during the night.

Apparently nothing had been saved. Dan could see a smoke-blackened brass bedstead amid the rubble. He called to some youngsters playing about the place.

"Bad fire," he said. "Anybody hurt in it?"

"The Parsons," a tow-headed boy answered. "They got burned up."

Dan winced, was about to comment that he was sorry to hear about it, when he noticed the boy staring at him with widened eyes.

"You a Ranger?"

"That's right, son," Dan said, smiling. He knew that most boys sort of looked upon Rangers as heroes. "I guess you don't often see a Ranger here in Amityville, eh?"

There was no answer to that.

The boy, who was about eight years old, shrank away, backing up half a dozen steps. Then he whipped about and began to run down-street. He yelled something at his half dozen playmates, and they, after staring at Dan, fled after him.

They yelled at the few people on the street, and those grown-ups turned to stare at Dan. It was as though he were an outlaw, not a lawman.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered,

and rode to the livery barn just ahead. The barn doors stood open, and the liveryman was just lighting a lantern against the coming dusk. Riding in, Dan said, "Like to put up my horse for the night. You got a blue roan stabled here?"

The liveryman was fat, but he saw the law-badge on Dan's shirt and the habitual jovial look faded from his flabby face. "Maybe I have, maybe I haven't. And if you want to look around . . ." He nodded jerkily toward the stalls already shrouded by twilight. "You'd better show me a search warrant."

Dan's temper flared, but his anger was so mixed with bewilderment that he ignored the impulse to swing down and take hold of the liveryman. He was puzzled that a Ranger should get such a welcome as this from a town like Amityville. In some other towns he knew, hostility toward a lawman wouldn't have surprised him. But here was a community of decent, law-abiding people—and even the kids were hostile!

Dan dismounted, said flatly, "I've got no search warrant, but I guess you've told me what I want to know. The blue roan doesn't interest me near so much as the man who rides him."

"You could do with some advice, Ranger."

"I could, eh?"

"Yeah. And I'm giving it to you. Ride out the way you came."

"And if I don't?"

"You'll find that you've got no friends in this town," the fat man stated simply. "You still want me to put up your horse?"

Dan retorted, "If you've got nothing against that claybank, just because a lawman rides it—yes." He strode angrily from the barn.

ONCE on the street, Dan decided that he'd better take it slow and easy. Black Matt Ketch was a notorious outlaw. This town knew that, yet its people were sheltering him. Those youngsters had spread the alarm, and the fat liveryman had let it be known where he stood.

Without a doubt, the whole town was siding Black Matt. It was a crazy situation, and apt to be a dangerous one for Ranger Dan Guthrie.

He rolled and lighted a quirly, carefully

surveyed the street. It was a nicely laid out street, with the business section about a plaza—or, as the townsfolk probably called it, a square. Houses and business places were painted. Amityville shamed most Texas cow towns.

A couple of farm wagons rolled by, heading for the country roads. The kids had vanished into their homes. A small group of men was gathered before the darkened bank building, another stood before the saloon which bore a sign, "Granger Bar."

Dan remembered that the freighter had said Black Matt was on a drunk yesterday. Dan knew enough about the outlaw's habits to think he might still be on a spree. Black Matt had a thirst hard to satisfy.

Swinging toward the saloon, Dan had to pass the group of men standing before it. They fell silent as he approached, eyed him narrowly, grudgingly made way on the plank sidewalk for him. A couple were overalled, straw-hatted sodbusters, the others townsmen. Dan imagined that he could feel their unfriendliness.

The saloon was a small place, empty of customers at the supper hour. If Black Matt had been there drunk, somebody'd gotten him out in a hurry. The bartender was bent over the bar, reading a newspaper. He was shiny bald, red-faced. He didn't look up until Dan rapped his knuckles on the bar, and even then his eyes avoided Dan's half angry stare.

He set out a shot glass, filled it with whiskey, recorked the bottle. He shoved back the half dollar Dan lay on the bar, and said, "Have that drink on the house, then clear out. It's my supper hour."

"You close up to go eat? Or is it just that I'm not welcome?"

"Tonight I'm closing up to go get supper."

Dan silently swore. He wanted to ask what was wrong with this town, knew that he would get no answer. He knew that he would get no answers to any questions, so he took out a wanted dodger—one bearing Black Matt Ketch's picture and description, and mention of a thousand dollars reward for information leading to his arrest. This he spread out on the bar. The bartender flicked a glance at it, no more.

"It must take you a long time to make a thousand dollars in this place, friend," Dan said.

"The name is Kelly. No need to call me 'friend.'"

"All right, Kelly. A thousand dollars is a lot of money."

"It's more than I need, at the moment."

"Maybe there's some needy soul in Amityville," Dan said sourly. "Suppose we just leave this dodger here, for your customers to see."

"Suit yourself," said Kelly.

He took off his apron, reached for his hat and coat, left the bar and stood meaningfully by the swing doors. Dan muttered an oath, downed his drink. He felt the need of a couple more, but knew that he wouldn't get them in Kelly's Granger Bar. He strode out of the place.

DAN stood outside the saloon and rolled another smoke. He watched Kelly, the bartender join the group of men waiting on the plank walk. Kelly said something in a low voice, and the others nodded. The whole bunch angled across the square, entered the hotel.

Dan had stopped at the Alamo House on a previous one-night visit to Amityville. It was operated by a retired rancher and his daughter, the Prices. Good people. They were Dan's sort of people.

Dan recalled that the hotel's dining room was the only place in town to buy a meal. He had a notion that Jeff Price, as a former cattleman, might not side Black Matt Ketch. Black Matt had started out as a rustler and a horse thief, on a small scale.

The outlaw hadn't gone into big crime—train and stagecoach holdups and bank robberies—until a year ago when he got mixed up with the Sumack wild bunch. Yes, old Jeff Price might tell the law where in Amityville Black Matt was holed up. Dan headed for the hotel.

The dining room was busy, but the lobby was empty. Jeff Price wasn't behind the desk. The register lay on the counter, and Dan, turning it about, glanced at the dozen or so names entered during the past week. He didn't actually expect to find Black Matt Ketch registered as a guest, and he was not disappointed.

"Sorry," a voice said. "We have no rooms. We're filled up."

It was Jodie Price's voice. She came from the cubby hole office. Dan was sure he knew why the Alamo House was filled up—he wasn't wanted as a guest. But he removed his hat, gave Jodie the smile that had often worked wonders with ranch girls and señoritas along the border. It didn't erase the frown that marred the prettiness of Jodie Price's face.

She was a tall girl about twenty, with wide gray eyes and a wealth of tawny hair. She looked like a girl with plenty of suitors, and Dan felt that it would be easy for anyone to lose his heart to her. The rough edge of anger was still in him.

"If your dad is around, I'd like to see him," Dan said.

"He's not around," Jodie replied. "He's away on a trip to Austin."

"The one man who would have helped me!"

"I'm not so sure of that, Ranger."

That did it. Dan's temper got out of hand. He put his hat back on his head, placed his hands flat on the counter, stared straight at the girl.

"This is no good, a whole town standing in the way of the law," he said bitterly. "You Amityville people have no right to shelter outlaws. Black Matt Ketch is wanted on a dozen charges. The Rangers want him for more than that. If he's caught, he can be made to talk—to tell where the Sumack crowd's hideout is. That's why he's important and has got to be found. Those Sumacks are killers."

Dan stopped abruptly, seeing that he was getting nowhere with Jodie Price. But he added more calmly, "I'll find Black Matt. Somebody in this town will grab at that thousand dollar reward bait."

Mention of the reward hadn't fazed bartender Kelly.

But Jodie Price looked suddenly uneasy, and Dan guessed that she feared there was somebody in Amityville greedy enough to want that reward.

He said, "All I have to do is camp here until somebody squeals." With that he turned away, going into the dining-room.

DAN ignored the other diners at the long table, and dug into the meal served him by the waitress. There was

talk; the others hurriedly finished eating. Bartender Kelly was first to shove back his chair and rise.

"See you later, boys," he muttered.

Somebody said, "Sure, Pat," and Kelly went out.

The others departed one by one, and finally Dan was alone. He ate his steak and fried potatoes, found the dried-apple pie very tasty, and had a second cup of coffee.

He paid for the meal, lighted a smoke, strolled into the lobby. Four men were seated there, quietly talking. Jodie Price was gone from behind the desk, and Dan, without knowing why, felt disappointed.

He was halfway to the door when one of the seated men said sharply, "Listen!" Their talk halted. There was a drumming of hoofs along the street—a horse coming in at a gallop. A yell lifted. Some men outside shouted. The four left their chairs, rushed to the window, and one said loudly, "There he goes—on his blue roan!"

Dan reached the door, jerked it open.

He rushed from the hotel just in time to see a rider loping east out of town. It was too dark for him to see if the horse was a blue roan and its rider Black Matt, but he would have gambled that no nester-farmer or townsman would ride like that.

Dan started running, toward the livery barn. All along the street people—men, women and children—were milling about excitedly, laughing and shouting.

The only person in a sour mood was Ranger Dan Guthrie.

It was too dark a night for tracking, but Dan knew that the Morada Badlands lay to the east beyond the Swayback Hills. Figuring that his quarry was heading for the malpais, Dan rode steadily through the darkness. He felt better, now that Black Matt had cleared out of Amityville. In the open, with no loosed townspeople to interfere, the showdown would certainly come. The outlaw couldn't keep on the move forever.

By midnight Dan was far across the valley with its tilled fields, and the road he had followed now swung sharply south. Leaving the road, Dan found the going rougher. The terrain grew rocky, and another mile brought him to the uplifts.

A year ago, trailing this way, he had been after a horse thief. He'd followed his man through a narrow cut in the cliff walls, thirty miles across barren desert. The chase had ended at a dried up water-hole, where his quarry's horse had given out.

Dan now figured that Black Matt—if the outlaw really was ahead of him, and hadn't kept to the road when it turned south through the valley—would make for that water-hole. And since it had been dry during this season last year, it might be empty now. Without water, the outlaw couldn't go on across the malpais. He would have to turn back.

Dan grinned to himself, with relish. He'd never been so eager to catch an owlhooter.

Locating the cut, Dan decided to rest his horse during what was left of the night. There was a shallow stream close by, and graze. At sunup, he'd find Black Matt's tracks and follow them on his rested mount.

When morning came, Dan found that he had guessed right. The blue roan's tracks led through the cut. Dan had followed the animal far enough during the past month to recognize its hoof marks. He mounted his big claybank, after filling his canteen at the stream, and rode through the rock hills.

He dug a strip of jerky from his saddle-bag and chewed on it. It was an hour before he cleared the Swaybacks and saw the vast expanse of the desert basin stretching out before him. He saw no rider in the distance, but the tracks guided him.

The malpais was studded with boulders and jagged rocks, cut raggedly by shallow gullies and deeper arroyos. It was a empty place, silent as a tomb, grotesquely eroded. It afforded a thousand ambush spots, and Dan now rode with his rifle across his saddle bow.

The sun was brassy, and heat haze shimmered in every direction. A furnace-hot wind began to blow about noon, sweeping up clouds of dust and sand. Dan rested his claybank for an hour, watering it from his hat, and when he was through, his canteen was more than half empty. It was when he swung to the saddle again that he saw the blue roan.

He saw it through swirling dust. Its owner was leading it, and coming along his backtrail.

Dan drew his Winchester out. He had only to wait in the scant shade of the rocks. Black Matt Ketch, tough as he was, couldn't stand up to the malpais.

He held his breath and waited.

A blast of wind shrouded man and rider with a dust cloud. The day was turning dark, the sun obscured. A sandstorm was sweeping across the basin. Dan waited for Black Matt to re-appear, and called out, "Stand as you are, Matt! You're covered!"

A voice cried, "Don't shoot, Ranger."

It wasn't Black Matt's voice, or even a man's voice.

Dan Guthrie was so startled he nearly dropped the Winchester. That was Jodie Price coming toward him with Black Matt Ketch's blue roan.

THERE was no time for questions. The wind struck with savage force, and whole world was full of choking sand. Dan left the saddle, led the two horses by their reins with one hand and got the girl about the waist with his other arm.

He got them down into a nearby arroyo that was narrow and deep enough to shelter them from the worst of the storm. He reined his bedroll from the cantle of the claybank's saddle, gave a blanket to Jodie to wrap loosely around her head so that she was partially protected from the sand. He pulled the other blanket over his own head. They lay flat in the arroyo bed, and the sandstorm howled above them.

It kept up for hours, and Dan had plenty of time to figure it out. He saw clearly that Jodie Price had feared the reward offer would make somebody in Amityville talk, so she had changed into riding clothes and gone to the livery barn while Dan was at supper.

She had been a ranch girl, and she could ride like a man. She must have known about the badlands, and hoped to lead Dan a wild goose chase across it. But the malpais had been too much for her. But why, Dan asked himself, did she take the risk for a no-good like Black Matt Ketch?

It was crazy. It didn't make sense.

Dan felt like shaking her. Instead, on hearing her utter a frightened whimper, he put his arms around her. And Jodie didn't shrink away from him.

When the wind finally let up and the dust and sand settled, the sky was star-studded. Dan shoved aside drifted sand, made sure that the horses were safe, then helped Jodie sit up. He gave her a drink from the canteen. Her face was pale and frightened in the gloom.

"Thanks, Ranger," she said huskily. "And for more than the water."

"You owe me nothing, Jodie."

"I'd have lost my head, maybe died in that storm, if I hadn't met you," she told him. She shuddered. "I wouldn't have thought of holing up in an arroyo. I guess I do silly things."

"It was a lot to do for any man. But why for Black Matt?"

"Because of what he did in Amityville last night," Jodie said, defiantly now. "There was a fire. The Parsons' house was in flames before anybody knew it. It was horrible, all the screams. The whole town was aroused, but everybody was afraid to go in and help those trapped people. All except Matt Ketch. He plunged in—three times. Each time he brought out a Parsons child. He couldn't save the parents. After the third trip he collapsed."

"Now I understand," Dan said.

"Matt was badly burned," Jodie went on. "He's in bed in town. We couldn't let you arrest him, not after what he'd done." She paused, a little breathless, then added fiercely, "He deserves a chance. That's all we wanted, just to give him a chance."

"A chance at what—at reforming himself?" Dan asked. He shook his head. "It won't work, Jodie."

"It might. Matt has proved he's not all bad."

"Maybe so. But I've got my orders. I've got to arrest him."

"You can't. The people of Amityville won't let you."

"They'd be foolish to stand in my way," Dan told her. "If they stop me, I'll have to make a report to headquarters. You know what'll happen then?" He paused, but Jodie didn't answer.

"A whole company of Rangers will be

sent to Amityville," he explained. "And they'll arrest every person who has interfered. You don't want to see that—decent people taken off to prison?"

Jodie shook her head, almost forlornly. "All right, you win," she said. "Let's get out of here."

Dan guessed that she hated him, and somehow that hurt. As they rode back through the badlands, Dan wanted to tell her how it was with him. That he was still duty-bound, even though he agreed with her that Black Matt Ketch had proved there was some good in him. But Jodie rode in silence. She didn't want to talk to him.

IT was mid-morning when Dan and the girl, having ridden all night, got back to town. A crowd gathered as they reined in before the Alamo House. Dan took the blue roan's reins when Jodie dismounted, saying that he would take both it and his claybank to the livery barn. Jodie gave him a brief nod, then faced the townspeople.

"I did the best I could," she said wearily. "But I couldn't cross the badlands. I wouldn't even gotten out of there alive, if it hadn't been for Dan—for this Ranger, I mean."

Color stained her cheeks.

Dan guessed she was remembering how the two of them had waited out the storm. He listened to her tell the gathering that it was foolish for Amityville to side Black Matt—that it would just bring more Rangers to the town.

"But we'll think of a way to help him," she said ringingly. "We'll raise a fund and hire a lawyer to defend him at his trial." Bartender Kelly was in the crowd, and she told him, "Pat, take this badge-toter to Matt, will you?"

Pat Kelly nodded his bald head, and, after Dan had left the horses at the livery barn, took him to a room in back of the saloon. It was Kelly's living quarters. He'd given the room up to the outlaw.

Black Matt Ketch didn't look much like a notorious bad man when Dan stepped into the room. Nor did he look dangerous. Sitting up in bed, propped up by pillows, wearing a nightshirt, he would have passed for somebody's hired man.

He had a dull looking face, with only

the scar across the left cheek to give it distinction. Matt's thatching of black hair grew low on his brow. His equally black eyes were not overly intelligent—nor did they show the sly cunning natural to a full-fledged outlaw. It was because of his poor mental equipment that the Rangers wanted him so badly. Black Matt's type could be encouraged to talk.

Black Matt swore, seeing Dan's badge. He held up heavily bandaged hands. "You've got me, Ranger," he growled. "I can't even lift a gun."

"Good that you can't, Matt. I wouldn't want to kill you."

"Sure, not. You'd rather see me hanged."

"You won't hang—not unless you've killed somebody and we find out about it," Dan said. "Maybe you won't get more than a couple of years in prison, if you're reasonable." He paused, watching the puzzled look come onto Matt's face.

"We want Bart and Jess Sumack," he went on. "And Utah Charlie. We want them bad. They're killer-wolves, Matt. You know that. You rode with them for nearly a year. You tell me where they're hideout is, and I'll see to it that you get a light prison sentence."

Black Matt's face was blistered with burns, smeared with healing grease. Finally he shook his head. "I rode with them until I couldn't stomach them," he muttered. "Then I saddled up and rode out one night when they were drunk. I've been on the run ever since, scared they would come gunning for me. I saw them kill Ed Wiley when he tried to quit the bunch. But I'm no squealer, Ranger."

His voice turned stubborn, and he said it again, "I'm no squealer!"

He kept saying that for nearly an hour, while Dan argued with him to be reasonable. And it was clear that he would go on saying it. Dan gave up finally, went to the Alamo House. He had a meal, then, finding an elderly man in charge of the desk, registered for a room.

Upstairs, he cleaned up and shaved. He stretched out on the bed, dozed off, and it was mid-afternoon before he caught up on his sleep. He pulled on his clothes, went downstairs. The oldster was still behind the desk, and nodded toward the little office when Dan asked for Miss

Price. Dan crossed and opened the door.

Jodie sat the rolltop desk, a ledger open before her. But she was in a study. She was frowning, and the frown grew more pronounced when she saw Dan.

"I've offered Black Matt a lighter sentence for telling where the Sumack crowd hides out," he said. "He won't talk. He's mule-stubborn, and it looks as though no lawman can make him talk."

"Why tell me this?"

"I figured you might reason with him," Dan said. "You and some of the other Amityville people."

"I could try," Jodie said. "Providing you have something better to offer him."

"Now, Jodie, I can't let him go scot free!"

"You could if you weren't blinded by the law," Jodie retorted. "You could let him escape, once he's told you what you want to know. You could give him a chance to cross the state line into New Mexico. If you'd give him a day's start, he'd make it. He'd be out of Texas, then, and who's to know how he got away?"

"I've an uncle over in the Territory who has a ranch. If I give Matt a letter, Uncle Jed will take him on as a cow-hand." She rose and faced Dan, very much upset. "Maybe I am wrong in believing he'll reform. But I saw the decent side of him, the other night, and . . . Oh, it's no use! I can see that on your face. You're not a human being, you're just a heartless badge-toter."

"That's not true, Jodie."

"Last night in the badlands, I thought that you—"

"Our waiting out the storm like that meant something to me too, Jodie."

"Then prove it" Jodie said fiercely.

Dan started to reach for her, but dropped his hands on seeing how rigid she became. He understood. The memory of how they spent those stormy hours out on the badlands was as strong in Jodie as in himself. She knew that they could build something good on it—a future together. But she would permit it only upon that one condition.

Dan looked bleak, and said, "I'm sorry, Jodie. But you're asking the wrong thing."

Jodie didn't answer.

Dan said again, "I'm sorry, Jodie," and turned away.

DAN waited until the next day, then told Black Matt to get into his clothes. He brought the horses, his own claybank and the outlaw's blue roan, from the livery barn and around to the back of the saloon. Pat Kelly helped Black Matt mount up. The prisoner grimaced with pain. It was his bandaged hands that hurt.

When they rode around to the street, most of the townspeople were gathered to say goodbye to Black Matt Ketch. The only person Dan missed was Jodie Price, though he kept looking toward the hotel. Black Matt waved a bandaged hand, and when they reached the edge of town he said chokingly, "First time in my life that I had decent folks for friends."

"I sure wish I could leave you here, Matt," Dan told him.

"Like hell, you do. You lawdogs are all alike!"

"I'm sworn to do my duty, that's all."

"I'd have made you do it the hard way, if I could've held a gun."

"Lucky for us both that you couldn't, maybe," Dan said.

After that, they ride side by side in a bitter silence.

With his hands so badly hurt and heavily bandaged, Black Matt didn't require much watching. Dan had Jodie Price in his thoughts rather than his prisoner, and he felt pretty unhappy about her. He guessed that he had fallen in love with Jodie, despite her being so unreasonable. But she'd asked the impossible of him, and would never forgive him for not doing it.

He thought once, I could let Matt escape—for her.

But he knew that he wouldn't. He wouldn't do that for anybody—not even Jodie. By late morning, they were out of the nester valley and into the Hatchet Range, a deep string of wooded hills. The road followed a winding pass. It would take Dan and his prisoner to San Marco, where his ranger company had its headquarters, eighty miles to the south.

They rounded a sheer slope perpendicular to the edge of the road and Dan saw, in a preoccupied way, three riders coming toward them. Then Black Matt grunted and jerked his horse to a stop.

"It's the Sumacks, Ranger. They must-

've picked up my trail. Here they come! Look out!"

Dan came alert then. There was Bart and Jess Sumack and Utah Charlie—road agents, bank and train robbers, gunmen with a dozen killings to their credit. Mad dogs of the human race. They hadn't been riding with their minds busy with the memory of a girl, as had Dan Guthrie. Always alert, this chance meeting didn't take them completely by surprise.

The burly Bart Sumack yelled, "It's that yellow quitter and a Ranger! Get 'em!"

Their guns began blasting before Dan got his sixgun clear of leather.

The whiz of a slug buzzed by his cheek.

Something hit Dan a sledge hammer blow, low in the left side. It took him an instant to realize that he'd stopped lead. Then his claybank spooked, reared high. Dan lost hold of his gun, grabbed for the saddle horn. The claybank came down, bucked again, and Dan nearly spilled off. He caught himself just in time.

He had a glimpse of Black Matt Ketch on the ground, on his knees. He'd been thrown. His blue roan had stopped a bullet and was down, thrashing wildly. Matt was tearing at the bandages of his right hand—with his teeth. He had a wild look.

The claybank settled down, and Dan jerked the Winchester from its scabbard. He swung from the saddle, pain knotting up in him. His knees started to buckle as he reached the ground, but he gritted his teeth and forced himself to stand. Ranger-fashion, he levelled the rifle across his horse's back—and fired.

The outlaws came in at a gallop, thinking they'd gotten their game. But Dan's first shot tore burly Bart from the saddle, dropped him over his horse's rump. He fired a second time, and Jess Sumack's mount, hit in the head, went down with its rider.

Utah Charlie reined in sharply, fired twice. One slug snatched Dan's Stetson away. The second creased the Ranger's left shoulder. Dan put his sights on Utah Charlie, squeezed the trigger as his legs gave way. Utah Charlie screamed as he fell from his horse, and it was a dying man's scream.

Dan sprawled on the ground. He saw Jess Sumack pick himself up and, his face ugly with rage, come on at a limping run. Jess was cursing wildly. His gun was coming up, and the range was point-blank. Dan tried to lift his rifle, but he couldn't quite make it. His reeling brain saw death approaching, but his body couldn't heed the warning.

Jess Sumack was only ten feet away when he fired. But short as the range was, he missed. For another gun had barked, its slug catching the outlaw in the chest. Dan saw Jess Sumack die, yet couldn't wholly believe it.

Dan lifted himself on his elbows, looked around.

He saw Black Matt Ketch standing there with a smoking sixgun in his unbandaged, horribly burned right hand. It was the gun Dan had dropped when the shooting started.

"The fools," Black Matt was muttering. "I wouldn't have squealed on 'em. What do they think I am?"

DAN wouldn't have made it back to Amityville alone. He would have bled to death, and some traveler would have found him lying there with the bodies of the Sumack brothers and Utah Charlie. But Black Matt Ketch got a spare shirt from Dan's saddle-bag, and wadded it tight against the wound.

And Black Matt Ketch, outlaw and lawman-hater, put Dan on his claybank horse and, riding up behind him, took him all the way back to the town and to the doctor's.

Dan didn't know much about that ride.

Nor did he know much about the operation the town medico performed to save his life.

He was unconscious a lot of the time, and he was dosed with chloroform when the doctor began to use his scalpel. Afterwards, he fell into a heavy sleep that lasted twelve hours.

Waking, he was abed in a room of the medico's house. He was so weak he couldn't move. But his pain was gone, and his vision had cleared. He turned his head a bit.

He could see the visitors the white-coated doctor let come into room. There was Jodie Price and Kelly the barkeep and Black Matt Ketch.

All three visitors seemed embarrassed. But they were glad he was alive.

Dan found strength enough to talk. "Thanks, Matt," he said, thickly, "I owe you my life." He forced a lopsided grin. "But remember, you're still under arrest. If you haven't escaped by the time I'm able to travel, then I'll just have to take you in."

"That's a lawman for you," Black Matt growled. "I should've let you die out there."

Kelly the barkeep insisted.

"Don't be silly, Matt," Jodie said. "He's telling you that now is your chance to make your getaway."

She crossed to the bed as the dull-witted Matt Ketch muttered, "He is?" It was Pat Kelly who took Black Matt out of there and got him started for the State line. Neither of those two saw Jodie Price lean over the bed and kiss the wholly helpless Ranger Dan Guthrie.

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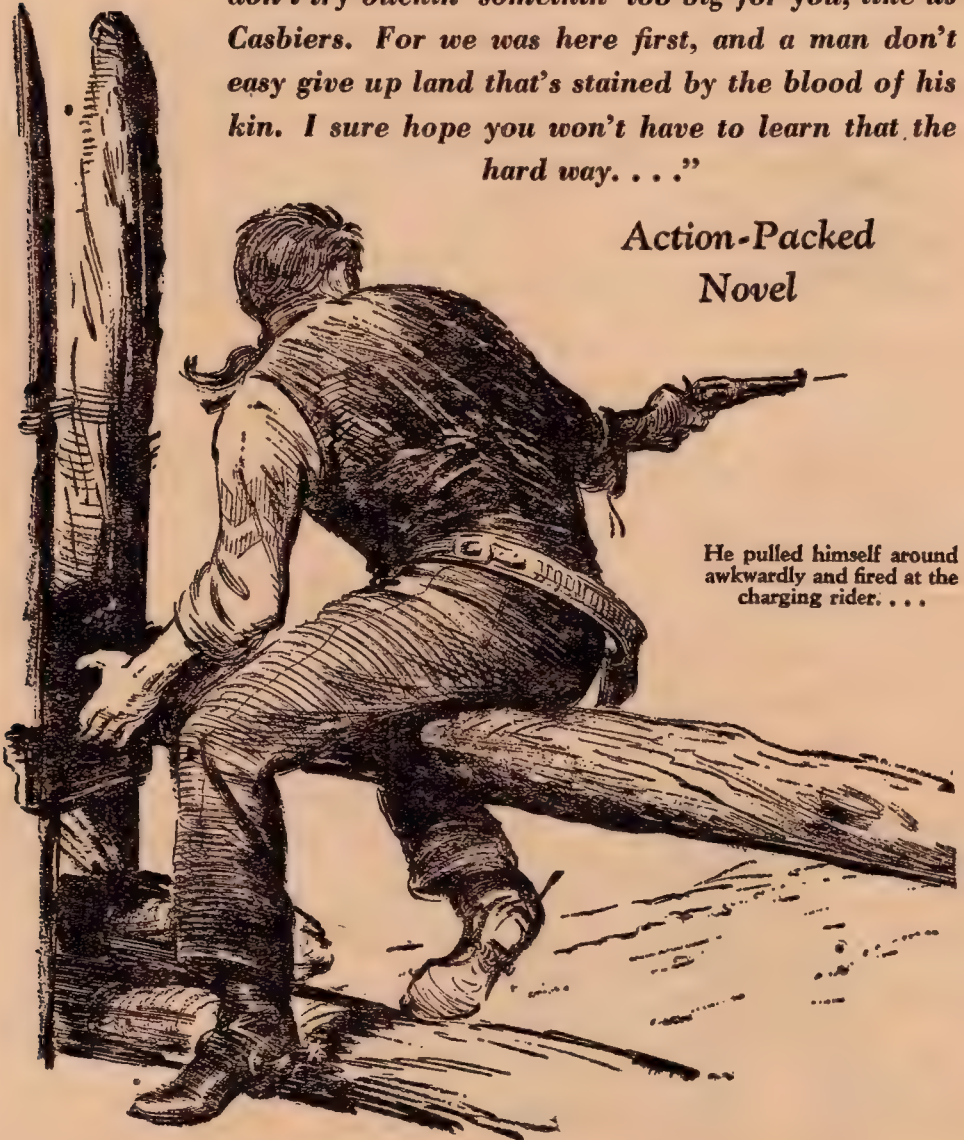


That Dark and Bloody Range

"You look like a good boy, Rand Hollis. I hope you don't try buckin' somethin' too big for you, like us Casbiers. For we was here first, and a man don't easy give up land that's stained by the blood of his kin. I sure hope you won't have to learn that the hard way. . . ."

Action-Packed
Novel

He pulled himself around awkwardly and fired at the charging rider. . . .



GUN-BOSS OF BROKEN BOW

IT WAS the same story everywhere Rand Hollis went. "You with them new people in the Bow? Well, we ain't hirin'. Who'd you ever ride for, son? No, we got more'n enough hands now."

He had left the Casbier place until last

because it was the largest, richest and most formidable outfit in the Broken Bow country. Rand had little hope of gaining anything here but he was bound to try. He had seen the Casbier boys and their riders in town, now he wanted to see the



By
**ROE
RICHMOND**

old man himself, and get an answer.

Rand Hollis rode into the yard and climbed the slope toward the long double-porched ranch house, with the barn, stables, sheds, and corrals scattered in the background.

The house was well built and solid but rundown and ill-kempt, the porches cluttered and untidy, the interior filled with crates and bundles stacked high inside the windows, looking more like a storehouse than living quarters. It was obvious that no women lived in the place. This was no country for women, and Rand wished his mother and sister were back in St. Louis. He was not ashamed of his family but he was beginning to feel ashamed of being a homesteader in this cattle country. It wasn't pleasant to be unwanted — even hated — wherever you went.

OLD Casbier sat in a rocking chair on the equipment-littered porch, smoking a cigar in the shade. He was a big broad man still vigorous and young, not old at all even though they called him Old Cas—a smart, strong and successful man. His hooded dark eyes were keen, the nose bold and prominent, the mouth under the black mustache firm and set in harmony with the hard bulging jawbones.

There was complete assurance in every line of his face and bulk. Casbier was comfortable and calm, but even in repose his power and will were evident. He waved the hand with the cigar to the young stranger:

"Light and set, boy. Can I offer you some refreshment?"

Rand Hollis shook his head. "No, thanks. I'm lookin' for a job."

"You a rider?" Casbier studied him with the mild detached interest he showed all men.

"I can ride. I can use a rope."

"Experience?"

"Not much," Rand admitted. "But I can do the work."

"You're new here," said Casbier. "You with them squatters down there, son?"

"Is it squattin' to file legal claims on government land?" The boy spoke harshly as the anger burned in him again.

Casbier laughed. "I reckon it is in this country, son. This land was made

for grazin'—and not at all for farmin'."

"There's enough for everybody," Rand Hollis said.

"It would seem that way," Casbier said slowly. "But there ain't really. It's too high and dry here for farmin'. A few seasons plantin' and there'd be no crops and no grass. Everythin' would burn up and blow away. I've seen it happen in other places. You'd have a desert here."

"You weren't grazin' the Broadlands."

"We do in the spring."

"Would a few settlers spoil that?"

"You let a few in and pretty soon you have a few hundred," Casbier said. "Before you know it, fences are everywhere."

"What are people supposed to do then?" demanded Rand Hollis.

"Go back where they came from," Casbier said bluntly. "This country ain't ready for farmers and women folk."

"What if there's nothin' to go back to?"

"They'll find more back there than out here. They'll last longer back there, boy."

"You're pretty hard," Rand Hollis said.

Casbier smiled gravely. "This is a hard country, son. A man has to be hard livin' here. Your people with you?"

Rand nodded. "Father and mother, brother and sister."

"Tell them to turn back, boy. I feel sorry for a man out here with his women and kids. He's licked before he starts. Now a young fella like you, alone, he'd get along right well here. If he had the stuff in him."

"Maybe you're right," Rand Hollis said dully. "But we've got no place to go."

"What your folks doin' in town? They workin' anywhere?"

"Had to, in order to eat." The boy's tone was edged, bitter. "Dad's helpin' Saffell in his saloon. Tommy's in Bilbrey's store. Mom and Betty work in the hotel."

"That ain't much of a life, is it?" mused Casbier. "You don't fancy it yourself. You want to be a rider and you look like one, son, but nobody's hirin' homesteaders. You look like a good boy. I hope you don't try buckin' somethin' that's too big and too set."

"It don't seem fair," Rand murmured, staring at his worn boots.

"Maybe it ain't, but life's that way," Casbier said. "We was here first, son. We fought for this land and we'll fight to keep it. My father, two of my brothers, and my wife, they died here. Indians, rustlers, and childbirth. You don't give up on land the blood of your family's run into."

"Yes, I can see your side," Rand Hollis said. "But I don't know—"

"I can see yours too. But I can't see any hope for it." Casbier shook the great dark head that was lightly flecked with gray, as if he were genuinely sorry for the homesteaders. It was difficult to believe that last week he had burned them out and driven them from the Broadlands.

"I'll be ridin' along," said Rand. He gazed across the rolling upland meadows, and then back at the big man in the chair. "I guess you aren't as bad as people make you."

Casbier laughed gruffly. "Maybe not, son. And maybe worse. When it comes to holdin' these Highlands I'm bad enough. I wish you and your folks luck—some-where else."

"Thanks." Rand Hollis stepped into the saddle, raised his hand, and wheeled the horse away.

THE broad undulating plains of the Highlands flowed in gradual uneven descent toward the river flats below. In the distance vast herds of red cattle moved slowly on the summer grasslands with a few riders in attendance, and beyond were the foothills and the mountains shouldering into the sky.

Rand Hollis rode with a hopeless sense of frustration and failure back toward the bottomlands and the town of Chipman Crossing on the Ogalala River. In him was a raw wild need for violence, to strike out at somebody or something, to fight for himself and his family and the other homesteaders. But how could you fight a whole population?

Nesters were not wanted, every man's hand was raised against them, and even in town they were only tolerated at best for the cheap labor they furnished.

It rankled to think of his mother working in that hotel kitchen, his sister Betty waiting on tables, Tom sweating at the counter for that old miserly vulture Bil-

brey, and his father tending bar and swamping in the Arrowhead Saloon. None of them was meant to perform such menial tasks, and it went against the grain to see them forced to humble themselves.

But there was nothing else to do in Chipman. They had arrived just as Casbier's riders were cleaning out the Broadlands, and there was no use in filing a claim after that. Next time, the Casbier forces would employ guns instead of torches. Most of the homesteaders had gone back eastward, but a few families had lingered at the Crossing. Greta Kohlmyer's folks were still there but they might leave any day, and then Rand wouldn't even have Greta to turn to. He shuddered, cold and empty at the thought.

Crossing the Broadlands he rode past the burnt-out cabins and barns of the homesteaders, the smell of charred lumber vile and nauseous in his nostrils, and fury flooding up red and hot inside him. These places that lay in blackened desolation had meant so much to those people—home, security, independence, comfort after long hardships, hope for the future.

Rand had seen their stricken anguished faces when they straggled into town, stunned and bewildered, the children wailing, the women sobbing or fighting back tears, the men stony-faced and hollow-eyed, blank with abject despair. It had filled Rand with murderous hate to see them, and it all came back as he thought of it now. He couldn't understand why the world should be so full of evil and greed, cruelty and selfishness, and stark inhumanity.

Later he had seen Casbier's men come in laughing, arrogant in the saddle, rack-ing their horses and swaggering into the saloons or strutting the street, crowding men and women alike out of their path. The Casbier boys, Lyle and Doake, were with them, big and handsome, superior and scornful.

Lyle was tall and rangy, lean and graceful, with a laughing mouth and mocking eyes. Doake was huge, massive, solid like his father, more quiet and serious, sometimes brooding and somber.

RAND had learned to identify others of the Casbier crew: Bevil, the cold-eyed taut-lipped deadpan foreman; Bull

Gaddis, the giant strongarm man; Kite Kanagy, the notorious gunman, and Rusty Rullo, another expert in that line; Conatser, wizened and sly; Sproull, plump and redfaced, soft and innocent in appearance.

Those were Old Cas's key men, and with them he ruled all the region of Broken Bow from Ogalala to the Mellendy Mountains. Rand Hollis hated them on sight, and yet today he had not hated Old Cas himself.

As Rand had told Cas, he could see the cattleman's side of the issue, but it was too narrow and bigoted to be fair. There was certainly enough land for everyone, and a few farmsteads on the Broadlands would not harm the grass of the Highland ranges. It was just that stockmen hated farms and fences and the people that brought them.

Well, there would be a change here sometime, if the homesteaders ever got strong and ready enough to fight for their rights. The trouble was they were a peace-loving people, who did not hold with fighting and killing.

Rand's father Frank was an example of this. A good man, too good and gentle for his own welfare, an honest patient easy-going man, friendly and kind. He had courage and dignity, but he was not aggressive at all, and if he ever had been ambitious, it was lost now. Life had beaten him down and he was resigned to it. He was younger than Cas Casbier, and yet he seemed older.

Hollis lacked the ruthless driving power that made Casbier so successful. He was too good-hearted, too generous, too fine a metal for the heat and strife of living. Frank Hollis was broadly intelligent, tolerant and sympathetic, liked and respected by all who knew him, yet his virtues constituted the weakness that withheld him from prospering.

He was a failure by all the ordinary standards, but in his own life and his relations with others he was a success. A success in himself, a failure in the world he lived in. There was something wrong with the system, Rand Hollis decided. The good qualities gained a man nothing.

It was evening and the lamps were glimmering pale and yellow in the dusky gray and lavender haze when Rand Hollis

rode into Chipman Crossing, his long lithe body tired but easy in the saddle. He favored his mother more than he did Frank. He had her sharp gray eyes and quick smile, some of her slender grace, and he was high-spirited like she was, faster moving than his father and brother, keener and more alert.

Rand was a tall young man in the early twenties, long-limbed and supple with a strong spread of shoulders, his hair sandy-brown, the gray eyes light and clear in his smooth bronzed face, the mouth broad but sensitive, firm and pleasant at once. His features were straight cut and strong-boned, plain, but with a clean inner light that attracted notice. He rode more like a cowhand than a homesteader, and he had practiced with the Colt .44 he wore until he was swift, skilled and accurate.

At the Chip Cross Corral he watered, rubbed down, fed, and left his bay gelding. Walking back to the main street he met Sheriff Harshany and his deputies, Honeycutt and Kopp, on the corner. Harshany was a trim, medium-sized, middle-aged man with prematurely white hair curled crisply under his hat, piercing eyes of the brightest blue, a neat black mustache, and a strong cleft chin. He smiled as he saw Rand, eyed the gun on the boy's right thigh, and shook his head reprovingly.

"Son, I wish you wouldn't tote that gun around all the time."

"Why not?" asked Rand. "Everybody else does."

"It's all right for punchers," Harshany said. "But when homesteaders pack 'em it's apt to cause trouble."

"And when they don't they get pushed around all over the place."

"Gettin' pushed around is some better than gettin' shot up," said the sheriff mildly.

"It is?" Rand Hollis smiled and shook his head. "I don't know. Some people maybe don't mind it, but I do."

"Well, kid, it's your funeral. Some of them Casbier boys'll be callin' you sometime when they're likkered up, and notice that iron on you."

"I can use that iron," Rand said quietly.

"I sure hope so if you're goin' to insist

on luggin' it around," said Harshany. "My sympathy ain't with the Casbiers. But don't you go huntin' trouble, son."

"I won't hunt it," Rand said. "I might even sidestep it. But I'm not runnin' away from it."

"That's a pretty good attitude," Harshany smiled. "I can't kick on that, boy. Did you have any luck findin' a job?"

"No, I didn't."

Harshany wagged his head. "They won't hire a homesteader on the range. They'd take on a Mexican first. It's a damn poor situation and I don't like it, but what can you do? It'll come to a head sometime and tear Broken Bow wide open. I hope I'm a long ways from here when it does."

Chapter II

AN HOMBRE WITH GUTS!

TOM HOLLIS was waiting on a lady customer when Doake Cashbier came into Bilbrey's General Store and tramped heavily to the counter, tossing a written list upon the smoothly-worn wood.

Doake said: "Fill this order for Casbier. I'm in a hurry."

"As soon as I finish with this lady," Tom said. He was short and stocky like his father, quiet, reserved and sober, a good-looking boy with wavy dark brown hair, mild brown eyes, a trace of softness about the gentle mouth and rounded chin. His skin was fresh and clear, his whole aspect clean and immaculate. He went on adding up the groceries piled on the counter in front of the woman.

"Never mind that," Doake muttered

impatiently. "I said I'm in a hurry, boy."

Tommy looked up at him in surprise, unable to comprehend such selfish rudeness. "I'll be through in a minute."

Doake Casbier wasn't in the habit of waiting for anybody or anything. When he spoke people usually jumped. He was old Cas's boy, strong as a bull moose, savage as a mountain lion. "Damn it all!" he said. "This is a Casbier order."

The woman was upset, nervous and frightened. Tom Hollis gestured at the big brawny man across the counter. "Please, mister. Have a little consideration—"

"Hell!" said Doake, reaching a long powerful arm across the wood and slapping a huge open palm against Tom's cheek. The curly head bobbed and the boy staggered from the vicious impact. The lady gasped and gaped at the giant beside her.

Doake said: "Let's have that grub now."

Tom Hollis shook his head, unable to speak, one side of his face numb and his head ringing. Doake leaned forward again and this time he struck with his fist, sledging it brutally into the unprotected face. It sounded like a cleaver on the chopping block.

Tom's head snapped back and his shoulders raked cans and boxes off a shelf. He hung there briefly amid the falling merchandise, then his knees jacked and he slumped forward on the floor. The woman screamed shrilly and Bilbrey came trotting out of his office at the rear.

"What is this, what's goin' on here?"

Bilbrey cried, beady eyes popping behind his spectacles. "Why, Doake, hullo

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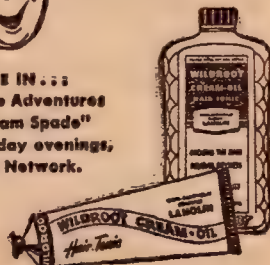
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Doake. And it's Mrs. Stanley, too."
"Your clerk got smart," Doake said.
"So I slapped him."

Mrs. Stanley gasped again, loudly and indignantly. "I'll be back later," she cried, glaring at the big man. "When this—after he—I'll come back for my things." She flounced out and slammed the door.

"Now what did you want, Doake?" asked Bilbrey, rubbing his thin hands together. "Sorry this happened. Don't understand it at all. Hollis was always nice and polite." Bilbrey had a hooked beak of a nose and a mouth down-curved like the blade of a scythe. He frowned at Tom's figure behind the counter.

Doake pointed at the list on the counter. "I'm in a hurry too, Bilbrey."

"Yes sir, Doake. Right away, right away." Bilbrey took the list and scurried along the shelves to collect the items.

"You better get a new clerk, Bilbrey," advised Doake Casbier.

"I'll do that, Doake," promised Bilbrey.

Tom Hollis got slowly to his feet, supporting himself on the counter. Blood leaked slowly from his nose and mouth and both were swollen. "You're damned right you will," Tom mumbled through the puffed lips, taking off the apron.

Doake looked at the boy and laughed uproariously. Tom stared at him with quiet intentness, turned away and walked out of the store. On the duckboards he paused and glanced up and down the murky darkness of the street, splashed here and there by lamplight. There were horses and rigs at the hitch rails and groups of men scattered about talking and smoking. Doake's laughter still echoed in his head, and Tom felt sick and ashamed.

He didn't want to see anybody, he didn't want anyone to know what had happened to him. It would only hurt his folks and they had been hurt enough. If Rand found out about it he'd go after Doake with a gun.

Tom Hollis wanted to creep off somewhere alone like a wounded animal. He wished they never had come here—it was a mistake from the beginning. It had taken all their money and left them nothing, not even self-respect.

Tom Hollis ducked furtively across the street toward the hotel. He didn't want

any supper. He would bathe his face and go to bed. He was tired, he had to work hard for Bilbrey, but he knew he wouldn't sleep for hours. He was worried about his father in that saloon, and Rand going around with that gun belt on.

He hated to think of his mother cooking in the hotel kitchen, and Betty waiting on the customers in the dining room, but at least they were safe. Tom slipped through the door into the lobby and ran upstairs toward the room he shared with Rand, hoping his brother wouldn't be there. Tom wanted to be alone with his humiliation and misery.

BOGARD had witnessed the incident in Bilbrey's market through the windows, and he had chalked up another black mark on the long score against the Casbiers. Bogard, an observant man, was new in Chipman Crossing and something of a mystery.

He had arrived a few days before the Hollises had. He was quiet, unobtrusive, agreeable, but something about him commanded interest and created speculation about his past.

Bogard was a big man, lean, well-muscled and fit, with a rugged scarred face, sunburnt and wind-whipped to a deep leathery brown. It was lined grimly from nostrils to the broad mouth, fretted with sun-squint wrinkles at the eye corners. His forehead was high and broad to balance the square solid jaws. His eyes were pale blue, steady and thoughtful, narrowed from staring into sun and wind. His nose had been broken and went well with the scars faintly traced on cheekbones and jaw, over one eye.

Big as he was, Bogard moved light and quick and easy as a great cat, and the gun sheathed on his right leg was no ornament. Bogard had fought with that Colt as well as with his big hands, but where and what for and on which side of the law nobody seemed to know.

Everybody was curious but there was no way of finding out unless Bogard chose to talk. As the old-timer said: "Askin' names and histories and lookin' too close at brands on ponies is special rude in this country, and not particular healthy."

Bogard hadn't been in Chipman twenty-four hours before he knew the town and

the Broken Bow area as if he had lived there all his life. He saw the Casbier riders storm up the street like raiding cavalry, heedless of the women and children who scattered before them. He saw them shoulder people off the flat sidewalks and crowd men away from the bars, and once Bull Gaddis knocked a lanky consumptive homesteader flat in the dust in front of his wife and kids. That was Kohlmyer, and his pretty blonde daughter had started for Gaddis with a buggy whip.

Laughing, Gaddis moved to meet the girl but stopped short when he saw Bogard standing there watching him with cold blue eyes. Bogard stepped forward helped Kohlmyer to his feet, and looked again at Bull Gaddis. There had been a tense moment until the Bull snorted and drifted off with his companions from the C-Bar-X. So far none of the riders had attempted to shove Bogard about, but he knew it would come sooner or later.

He had ridden out to the Broadlands, talked with the settlers there, and seen that they lived in constant fear. He had wandered over the Highland ranges and scanned the herds and ranches. The small ranchers may not have liked homesteaders any better than Casbier did, but they were for the most part too busy and short handed to bother with them.

Casbier wages lured all the best cow-punchers and left the little spreads sorely undermanned, and yet Bogard had known they would be afraid to hire young Rand Hollis or any other homesteader. Casbier dominated the whole of Broken Bow, and the poorer cattlemen were under his heel nearly as much as the squatters were.

From the flats of the Ogalala to the ramparts of the Mellendy Range Old Casbier was king. Alone he might have been a rather benevolent monarch, but there was no benevolence in his sons or in his riders. Lyle and Doake Casbier were born tyrants.

Bogard had seen the Hollises come into the Crossing and noticed at once what a fine looking family they were. Rand caught his eye first, riding alongside the wagon, a real horseman and a likely lad—blood, breeding and spirit in every line of him. But a boy like that won't last here, Bogard thought. He'll never take the

treatment the Casbiers hand out. He'll fight back and die in under their guns within a couple of weeks.

Tom, riding on the other side, was a nice clean-cut boy too, but lacked his brother's fire and strength. Frank, the father, driving the team of work horses, had a quiet kind of nobility in his features and manner, but defeat was there too, and under it he had shrunk and diminished somehow, grown patient and resigned. The woman beside him held her chestnut head high, however, and looked out on the world with straight and fearless gray eyes.

Bogard, who read people with the insight of long experience, saw at once the mother's likeness in Rand, and the similarity between the father and Tom. Then Bogard saw the girl Betty and he was blinded to everything else.

She looked so much like a girl he had known and loved and lost years ago that it took his breath away, left him dazed and incredulous. She had the same pure profile, the same proud dark head, and her lithe young body was firm and rounded with the same strong fullness, marked with the grace and ease that Bogard remembered with the sharpness of pain. It was unbelievable that she could look so much like that other woman. It drew Bogard as nothing had drawn him since he last saw Ellen.

HE MADE himself known and helpful to them. Without alarming them, he admitted that the situation was bad at the moment, and that their arrival was somewhat inopportune, inasmuch as the time was near for the Casbiers to strike at the shanties on the Broadlands.

Bogard was with them when the smoke billowed up black and ugly over the plain, and the heart-broken homesteaders stumbled into town with their pitiful possessions, shock and horror in their glazed eyes and sooty faces. Some had lost even their wagons in the flames and were loaded down like pack mules with household goods. It was a scene that cut Bogard to the bone and loosed a scalding fury in him.

Now, after watching Tom Hollis go into the hotel, Bogard shaped another cigarette, smoked thoughtfully, and turned after a time toward the lights and noise

of the Arrowhead Saloon into which a band of Casbier punchers had recently shouldered their way.

Bogard decided to make sure that Frank Hollis would take no abuse from them. Saffell, the owner of the place, was a good upright man and one of the few in town who would stand up against the Casbiers, but he could not be everywhere at once or could he perceive everything that happened in the crowded barroom.

Bogard pushed into the swirling smoke and din, finding a place at the bar. Saffell himself was behind the bar with a couple of assistants, while Frank Hollis and another waiter were rushing drinks to the tables. The Casbier hands occupied a large table near the end of the bar where Bogard had taken his stand. Frank, his fine face damp with sweat and haggard with weariness, smiled and stopped when he saw Bogard.

"Hullo, Bo," he said, gladness in his quiet voice.

"How you standin' it, Frank?" inquired Bogard. "Looks like a big night."

Frank Hollis nodded. "They're all big. I guess this is the business to be in." He laughed shortly. "Not that I like it, Bo."

"Well, it's only temporary," Bogard said.

Bull Gaddis bellowed out in back of them: "Hey, you! Bring another bottle, Pop, and bring it fast!"

Frank Hollis looked around nervously, nodded, and went on after the whiskey. Bogard nursed his drink and pondered on a civilization that so often forced good men to serve their inferiors. It seemed somehow that the deck was stacked so the cards seldom if ever fell right, and nearly always the wrong hombres held the winning hands. Most of Bogard's life had been spent in trying to balance the deal for the unfortunates who never drew the good cards. It was an old pattern that was repeating itself in Chipman Crossing.

FRANK HOLLIS, sticky figure stooped and sagging with fatigue, delivered the bottle to the Casbier table, collected payment, and hastened on to attend to other thirsting patrons. Bull Gaddis bellowed at him again:

"Mop up this table, Pop! What the

hell kinda waiter do you think you are?"

Frank hesitated and tossed a bar towel onto the table. "I'm busy right now." He started on.

"Why, you old—!" Gaddis heaved his bulk up from the chair and caught Frank Hollis by the collar, jerking him back roughly and pressing his head down over the slopped wooden surface. "I'll wipe it with your face then," gritted Gaddis.

The struggling Frank was a child in the giant's grip. Bogard set down his glass and strode out from the bar, tapping Gaddis on the shoulder. Bogard said coldly:

"Let him go."

Gaddis whirled, threw Frank against the bar, and glared at Bogard. "Who the hell cut you in, mister?"

"I don't like to see a big man pick on a little man," Bogard said. "'Specially when the little one is older."

Gaddis snorted and swung ponderously. Bogard lunged inside the roundhouse blow and struck solidly, left and right. Gaddis went over backwards on top of another table. It collapsed under him with a splintering crash. Gaddis thrashed about in the wreckage and reached for his holster, but Bogard's left boot stamped that wrist into the planks and his right boot drove in under Gaddis' heavy jowls. Gaddis' head thumped the floor and he lay still.

The other Casbier riders were up, astonished at the abrupt downfall of big Bull Gaddis, uncertain at this unexpected turn of events, a little awed by the speed and power of this rawboned tough faced stranger. The red-haired Rullo started for Bogard's back, and Kite Kanagy reached for his gun, but the clear voice of Saffell stopped them instantly.

"Hold it, boys!" Saffell came out from behind the bar with a sawed-off shotgun levelled. "Take the Bull and get outa here. Do your drinkin' somewhere else after this."

Sproull, plump-faced, rosy-cheeked, amiable, shook his head. "You're crazy, man—plumb crazy."

"No," Saffell said. "I'm just sick of havin' you Casbier boys manhandle my help and my customers."

Kite Kanagy grinned like a coyote. "Why we'll pull this shack right down over your ears, Saffell," he drawled.

"Maybe," said Saffell. "But quite a few of you'll go down with it."

Rusty Rullo stalked back toward the proprietor. "You're askin' for it, friend."

"Get out," Saffell said, gesturing with the shotgun. "Drag the Bull with you."

Bull Gaddis was getting to his feet now, working his right wrist and massaging his jaw and throat, looking at Bogard with murder in his eyes. "I'll be seein' you, mister," Bull said.

"I'll be around," said Bogard.

"But not very long," Kanagy drawled.

"We'll see," Bogard said mildly.

Gaddis reached for the whiskey bottle. "This is paid for."

"Leave it," ordered Saffell. "I'm not chargin' you damages."

"Friend, you may not know it," Rusty Rullo said. "But you're goin' outa business."

The Casbier crew made their departure with unhurried insolence.

Bogard smiled ruefully at Saffell. "A good thing you came up with that cannon, Saff. But I'm afraid it'll let you in for a lot of trouble."

"I've been waitin' a long time for that," Saffell said calmly, happily. "I thought nobody'd ever stand up to them so I could make my play. Bogard, I'm proud to know you. Step up now, gents, everybody. The drinks are on the house."

Chapter III

THERE'S HELL AT CHIPMAN CROSSING TONIGHT!

MRS. HOLLIS, flushed from the hot cookstove, smiled at her daughter Betty and slid two large steaks across the serving board. "The last two, I hope." The supper hour had been long and busy, and she was tired.

Betty nodded and smiled back, but her hazel eyes were troubled. "And the worst two," she murmured.

"Who are they, Betty?"

"Young Lyle Casbier and Bevil, their foreman." The girl's ripe sensitive mouth curled in distaste.

"Don't let them bother you, dear," Mrs. Hollis said soothingly.

"But I hate this so!" cried Betty.

"I know," her mother said. "But it's

not for long." She watched her daughter lift the tray and turn with lithe young grace through the swing doors into the dining room. Her fine face aged as the smile faded and her eyes darkened with sadness.

The last two customers watched the waitress approach their table, Lyle Casbier handsome and smiling, Bevil expressionless and slit-eyed. Lyle prided himself on having a way with women and the haughty indifference of this pretty girl both intrigued and irked him.

"Sit down for a minute," Lyle invited casually.

She shook her dark head. "I have work to do."

"Forget it," advised Lyle. "You're too good-lookin' to work anyway."

But Betty was already walking away, and Bevil was shaking with silent mirth. "Losin' your touch, Lyle," he chided, and attacked his steak.

Lyle stared after the waitress until she disappeared into the kitchen. There were tables to be cleared but apparently she planned to wait until the room was empty.

"You think so?" Lyle said absently, looking at his plate without interest, his lean face taking on a harsh cruel cast. "We'll find out a little later."

"Ain't she the gal this stranger Bogard's interested in?"

"I don't know and I don't care."

"This Bogard looks like he might be kinda tough," Bevil mused.

Lyle Casbier laughed. "This is no place for a stranger to get tough in, Bev."

"Not if he figures on stayin' healthy," agreed Bevil.

Betty Hollis came back into the dining room and Lyle summoned her imperiously, eyeing her with insolent amusement as she crossed the floor.

"You want something?" Betty asked, coloring under his scrutiny.

"Sure, I want a lot of things," Lyle said, looking her up and down.

The girl was twirling impatiently away when Lyle Casbier reached out quickly and caught her wrist, drawing her back to his side. At that moment boots sounded in the lobby entrance and Rand Hollis entered, his voice lashing across the room:

"Let go of her!"

Still clamping Betty's arm, Lyle turned in his chair to survey the new arrival. "And who the hell are you?" he demanded with quiet scorn.

"Turn her loose," Rand said, striding toward the table.

Bevil pushed back his chair and stood up. "Better mind your own business, sonny," he said in a flat toneless voice.

Rand didn't even look at him but kept his gray eyes fixed on Lyle Casbier, who was still seated, still gripping Betty's wrist. In sudden fury the girl struck out with her free hand, slashing it across Lyle's face. He recoiled in surprise, and Betty wrenched her other hand loose and backed away.

"Don't fight with them, Rand," she pleaded. "Come with me."

But Lyle was already bouncing up out of his chair, disregarding Rand and driving toward the girl. Rand stepped in and swung his right fist in a sharp savage arc. The impact was loud and Lyle's curly black head jerked backward. He was falling when Rand smashed him again, and Lyle landed on his shoulder blades and slid into the corner. His skull thumped the baseboard and he sprawled limp.

BEVIL'S gun was out and leveled when Rand whirled to him and looked death in the eye. The boy had no chance of drawing. Betty screamed and threw herself forward between Rand and the menacing gun barrel. Bevil was plainly puzzled and even his poker face showed it.

"What the hell is this?" he muttered.

"My brother," sobbed the girl. "Don't shoot, *don't!*"

"I ain't shootin'," Bevil said, holstering the gun. "But I reckon Lyle'll be lookin' for you, kid."

"He can find me all right," Rand gritted. "Betty, you'd better go."

"You're coming with me, Rand," the girl said firmly, tugging at his arm.

"Both of you run along," Bevil told them. "Beat it now. I'll take care of Lyle here."

Lyle Casbier was beginning to stir and mumble as Bevil shooed the brother and sister out into the kitchen. Bevil said: "You better be hard to find around here, son. Lyle ain't goin' to like this none."

He went back, wet a scarf in the water

pitcher, and crouched over Casbier. Lyle came to, fighting mad.

"Where is he?" he panted. "Where is that—?"

"I run him out," Bevil said. "Easy now, Lyle, easy, boy."

Lyle scrambled to his feet, wild-eyed and snarling, heedless of the blood from his broken mouth. "Why didn't you knock him down, keep him here for me? Damn it all, Bev, we can't let—"

"Her brother," Bevil cut in. "Nobody's goin' to stand around and see his sister mauled, Lyle."

"And nobody's goin' to hit me and live to tell of it," Lyle Casbier grated. "Which way'd he go, Bev?"

Bevil gestured at the lobby and front entrance. "He's out in the hills by now. Let's round the boys up and get started home."

Lyle shook his curly head. "I never thought he'd hit me. I never paid any attention to *him*."

"That's the trouble with us," Bevil said. "We figure nobody'll dare fight back at us. Bound to get surprised sometime."

At the lobby desk Lyle inquired and ascertained the identity of Betty and Rand Hollis. In the street they found an angry cursing crew of Casbier riders watching the Arrowhead Saloon.

Bull Gaddis and Kite Kanagy were all for going back to get Bogard and Saffell and clean out the joint, and Rusty Rullo was inclined to side with them. Sproull argued against this, and Bevil immediately upheld the fat man's viewpoint. Doake Casbier and others had started for the ranch some time ago.

"We ain't startin' no shootin' war without Old Cas's say-so," Bevil said.

"But what the hell's happenin' here?" Lyle wanted to know. "We never had any trouble in this town. All of a sudden now everybody's talkin' and actin' up to us."

"It's that Bogard," grumbled Bull Gaddis. "Him and them Hollises."

Sproull nodded. "The Hollises ain't much account, but that Bogard is bad."

"There's one Hollis that ain't to be overlooked," Bevil said dryly. "Let's get out to the ranch and tell Cas there's a change in the weather."

They were climbing into their saddles when Sheriff Harshany and Deputies Honeycutt and Kopp strolled up. "Any trouble tonight, boys?" asked the sheriff.

Lyle regarded him with sullen scorn. "Nothin' we can't handle."

SMOLDERING with rage and a raw need of violence, the Casbiers moved along the street, held in restraint only by the steadying presence of Bevil, the complacent good nature of Sproull. Waiting to cross the thoroughfare were a tall, stooped man and a girl whose hair shone golden in the vague lamplight. Kohlmyer and his daughter Greta.

Bull Gaddis swore. "Is that old scarecrow still in town?" Veering his mount sharply Bull drove at the two figures. The girl screamed and tried to pull her father out of danger, but the old man thrust her behind him and stubbornly stood his ground. The horse's shoulder struck Kohlmyer and sent him spinning away. His head crunched against the upright of a hitch rack as he fell full length.

Greta yelled again and fire spurted from a small pistol that was suddenly and surprisingly in her hand. Bull Gaddis unleashed his quirt at her as his horse reared. The crack of the whip was like another shot in the street. Blinded, seared and stunned by the vicious lash, Greta stumbled back and sat down on the board walk.

"You bull-headed damned fool!" Bevil said above the noises of horses and men. "Ride now!" The C-Bar-X men lifted their mounts into a gallop and swept on out of Chipman Crossing.

When Harshany and his deputies reached the scene, old man Kohlmyer was dead in the ditch, and Greta was kneeling and weeping beside his lank body. Blood poured down the girl's face from the long ugly stripe the quirt had cut across her nose and both cheeks, narrowly missing her eyes. The sheriff and his men gasped and cursed at the sight.

"They'll pay for this night's work, so help me God!" Harshany said. "This time they've gone too far. Way too far."

"Old Cas himself wouldn't hold with this," muttered Honeycutt.

"For once it don't matter what Old Cas wants," Harshany said firmly. "Get

this girl to the doctor, boys. I'll take care of Kohlmyer."

"You'll never raise a posse in Chipman to ride against the Casbiers," said Kopp dejectedly.

"No?" Harshany said. "Well, if this girl's face and her father's body don't rouse up a posse, then there ain't any men left in town worth takin'!"

Bevil, riding morosely at the head of the column, was well across the Broadlands when he became aware of a lessening of sound at his heels. Reining up and wheeling around to check on his party, the foreman discovered that three riders were missing: Lyle Casbier, Bull Gaddis and Rusty Rullo.

"Where'd they drop to?" demanded Bevil. "Where they headin'?"

There was no answer save shrugs and gestures from Kanagy, Sproull, Conatser, and the other horsemen.

"All right," Bevil said. "Let 'em go to hell their own way."

Kite Kanagy grinned his jackal grin. "It'll be hell all right in the Crossin' tonight. Don't you reckon we better ride back, Bev?"

"You can," said Bevil. "Any of you that wants to. I'm goin' on."

"Old Cas won't like it," Kanagy drawled. "Leavin' Lyle and them."

"There's a whole lot of things Old Cas won't like about this night," said Bevil. "I'm ridin' to the Highlands. You boys do as you please."

Kanagy hunched his bony shoulders and sighed. "Well, there's other nights comin'."

They forded the Ogalala and climbed toward the C-Bar-X in the Highlands. From time to time some of the riders glanced back toward the dull blur of light that marked Chipman Crossing, but Bevil never turned his head.

Chapter IV

SLOW DRAW—QUICK COFFIN!

THE town seethed with excitement and indignation as the news spread from bar to bar, corner to corner, house to house. Kohlmyer had been ridden down, killed in cold blood by the Casbiers, and his lovely daughter Greta had been muti-

lated for life. Tom Hollis had been beaten up by big Doake Casbier. Betty Hollis had been insulted by Lyle Casbier, and Lyle in turn had been knocked out by Rand Hollis.

Bull Gaddis, picking on old Frank Hollis in the Arrowhead, had been thrashed by Bogard. With a sawed off shotgun Saffell had chased the C-Bar-X forces from his saloon and told them never to return.

Encouraged by these indications that men at last were beginning to stand up for their rights against the Casbier clan, people all at once remembered multifold humiliations and indignities suffered at the hands of the Casbiers. There were slights, injuries, embarrassments without end, and nobody in Chipman had escaped unscathed. There were wronged daughters, beaten sons, ridiculed wives, humbled husbands.

Now a sudden storm of resentment rose against Old Cas, his sons and his hired hands, and many townsfolk were ashamed of having sided with the overbearing cattlemen against the downtrodden homesteaders.

There was nothing wrong with homesteaders. Where would you find any nicer people than the Hollises and Kohlmyers and their kind? It was time to recognize and unite against the true enemy of all Broken Bow. Against Old Cas, the tyrant, and his hellion sons, his gun-sharp punchers.

The more the citizens gathered and talked and thought and recalled incidents of Casbier arrogance and brutality, the higher and fiercer their feeling ran, until men who customarily quaked at the mention of the Casbiers were buckling on gun belts and vowing vengeance.

The Arrowhead Saloon, a kind of unofficial headquarters, was perhaps the quietest and calmest spot of the street. Sheriff Harshany and his deputies had repaired there to talk things over with Bogard, Saffell, Rand Hollis, and other acknowledged leaders. Old Frank Hollis, quietly taking it all in, was amazed at the abrupt maturity of his son Rand, who was something of a hero for having slugged Lyle Casbier.

In the hotel lobby Mrs. Hollis and Betty waited unhappily with other women

and some of the older and less active men of the community. Upstairs in his room, Tom Hollis was one of the few persons in town unaware of what had transpired. Tom's shameful suffering was great enough to obscure everything else. It wasn't so much his lumped and aching jaw or his swollen lacerated mouth that bothered Tom Hollis as he lay there in the lonely darkness. Doake Casbier's heavy fist had left deeper wounds than those in the boy's sensitive nature.

Tom never had been much for fighting, but as he writhed there reliving that degradation in Bilbrey's store, it came to seem that he would never again know peace and self-respect and security on this earth until the monstrous Doake Casbier was dead and buried.

For an immeasurable time Tom wrestled and sweated with his mortification. Somehow Doake's knuckles had branded him as unclean, undesirable, loathsome in his own eyes. While Doake lived, Tom could never hold his head up and look the world in the eye.

He struggled there in the room until the pangs of hunger began to penetrate him. Slowly but surely the honest reality of hunger invaded and drove out his tortured fantasies.

Tom Hollis had not undressed. He got up finally, relit the lamp, and stared at himself in the cloudy chipped mirror. He decided to slip down the back stairs and find something to eat in the kitchen. The hotel seemed to slumber, the street outside was still lighted dimly but quiet in the night. Tom started for the door, but something drew him back.

There was an old Walker Colt .44 on the stand. Tom hefted and examined it thoughtfully—long, heavy, ungainly in his hand. Nodding at last he thrust the gun in under his belt and stepped out into the corridor.

TWO things were uppermost in Lyle Casbier's brain as he rode back toward Chipman Crossing: To turn his guns loose on Rand Hollis, and to get his hands on Betty. He had an idea Rand was still in town, despite Bevil's story of flight. The boy didn't scare that easy and he wouldn't be leaving his sister.

It was a new experience for Lyle to be

knocked down without even a chance to strike back, and he would never rest until he had wiped out the memory of it. As for Betty, the girl was in his blood like quicksilver, and he meant to have her in his arms at any risk or cost whatever.

Big Bull Gaddis had one purpose for heading back to the Crossing, and that was to get Bogard under his guns. If he had to kill other men in order to accomplish this it was incidental, but Bogard must never see another sunrise.

Gaddis growled deep in his throat as he reviewed the scene in the Arrowhead. Bogard had smashed him to the floor, stamped his gun hand into the planks, and booted him under the jaw. All this in front of many witnesses. It was enough to insure Bogard's death three times over.

The red-headed Rullo turned back to town mainly because he craved excitement. He hadn't used his guns in quite a stretch and he felt the need of unlimbering them. It was generally conceded that Kite Kanagy was the quickest man with a Colt in the Broken Bow country, and for months Rusty had been itching for an opportunity to disprove this theory.

Another thing was that Rullo's professional pride had been hurt at being ordered out of a saloon like a common saddle-tramp. Rusty had decided then and there to take Saffell's life for flourishing that shotgun in the collective faces of C-Bar-X.

The three riders threaded a back way into Chipman with Lyle Casbier in the lead. Gaddis and Rullo thought the boss's boy overcautious, but did not mention it. They were still supremely contemptuous, of the town and all its people. Lyle was too, but he wanted to get to the Hollises

before any extra shooting interfered with his personal plans.

"What first?" grunted Bull Gaddis.

"I'm goin' to scout the hotel," Lyle said. "You boys wait for me."

They dismounted in the deep shadows of the stable behind the hotel. Bull and Rusty knew what Lyle's objectives were, but they didn't like being left out altogether.

"I better drift along with you, Lyle, to cover your back," Rusty Rullo suggested.

"All right," Lyle assented. "Bull, you stay with the horses."

Gaddis was displeased with this assignment, but Lyle was Old Cas's son and had to be accorded a certain amount of consideration. Grumbling, the Bull took the reins and settled back to wait, leaning on the stable wall and biting off a fresh chew of tobacco, while Lyle and Rusty trod carefully toward the rear of the hostelry where a door opened into the kitchen. Faint lamplight flickered at the windows but a quick glance told Lyle the interior was vacant. Well, it was a way in, at least. The door creaked open and they slid inside.

"What next?" Rusty Rullo asked impatiently, seeing little sense in this. They should have gone straight to the Arrowhead and got this jamboree started right.

"Wait here, Rusty," said Lyle. "I want young Hollis if he's around. And maybe his sister." He strode toward the dining room door. Rullo lounged back on the edge of a table murmuring under his breath.

Beyond the stove in a far corner of the room was an open stairway. Tom Hollis had descended just in time to hear Lyle

Here's how I proved to Mary...

THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE **ALKA-SELTZER** FOR FAST RELIEF FROM HEADACHE

I CAN'T GO, DARLING... THIS HEADACHE'S TOO MUCH FOR ME!

SURE YOU CAN! HERE, **SEE HOW FAST ALKA-SELTZER** MAKES YOU FEEL BETTER!

HERE WE GO! WE'RE OFF FOR FUN!

RIGHT, JIM! THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE **ALKA-SELTZER** FOR FAST RELIEF FROM HEADACHE

AT ALL DRUG STORES U.S. AND CANADA

say something about "... young Hollis and maybe his sister..." Tom recognized the Casbier brother and thought he was drunk, talking to himself, but he also realized threat to Rand and Betty. Tom drew the long-barreled Walker Colt from his belt and stepped forward into the kitchen.

"Wait a minute," Tom said. "My name's Hollis."

Lyle Casbier's right hand swept as he swiveled about and his gun cleared its sheath before Tom pulled the trigger, instinctively and without thought. A thunderous blast filled the room, and Lyle rocked backward as the .44 slug smashed his breastbone. An awful surprise twisted Lyle's face and widened his eyes.

He couldn't believe it had happened to him, and he was still trying to lift his own Colt when his legs folded beneath him and the floor tilted eerily up to hit his face. "No," Lyle gasped, choking with blood. "No, no..." A dark flood drowned his words and spread glistening on the wood. His limbs ceased twitching instantly.

Then even before the voice sounded, Tom Hollis sensed another presence in the kitchen, and wheeled to find it—too late. "You poor damned fool," Rusty Hullo said, and shot him twice through the chest. The swift impacts drove Tom back against a sink. Squirming around he caught hold with his left hand and fought to support himself but the effort was too much.

He dropped to his knees with his forehead against the cool metal rim of the sink, the life going out of him with a roaring rush as he knelt there. I got one Casbier anyway, he thought. Not Doake but his brother. I wish Rand was here...

Tom strangled, fell back disjointedly, and never felt the floor in under his shoulders.

Rusty Rullo, feeling suddenly alone in the midst of enemies, slammed out the kitchen door and raced for the stable. Two horses were there, his and Lyle's, but Bull Gaddis and his mount were gone.

LLEFT alone with the horses, Bull Gaddis had been fretful and disgusted. No telling how long Lyle and Rusty would fool around in there. Gaddis resolved to

do some scouting of his own and locate Bogard if possible. The horses would stand all right, and the other two boys didn't need him any more than Bull needed them.

Gaddis had no idea that he had killed old Kohlmyer. In fact he had forgotten the whole irrelevant affair. Riding at Kohlmyer had been simply an expression of his hatred for homesteaders and an outlet for the feelings Bogard had aroused in the giant. Striking Greta with his quirt had been an automatic reaction to the shot she fired at him with that toy pistol. But Gaddis *did* want to see Bogard dead, and he was going to before the night ended.

Leading his horse, Gaddis moved out the alley toward the street and the Arrowhead Saloon. He had barely reached the corner when the shooting broke out in the rear of the hotel. For a moment he stood there indecisively. Then, as running feet pounded all along the street, Bull Gaddis crowded his horse out of the alley into the back yard of the harness shop that stood beside the hotel.

He saw Rusty Rullo burst out the kitchen door and stretch for the stable, but nobody else emerged and Gaddis froze with the thought that someone had got Lyle. There would be hell to pay if Old Cas's boy was dead.

There would be such a slaughter that the streets of Chipman and the Ogallala River would run red with blood. Bull Gaddis licked his thick lips and his eyes gleamed at the prospect. Been a long while since the Bull had been on a real rampage.

Now running figures streamed past the alley mouth and boots clattered on the front porch of the hotel as lights began to glimmer throughout the building. A few men, gauging the direction of the shots with more judgment, turned into the alley and thudded past Bull's hiding place. Gaddis grinned and drew his right hand gun. Maybe Bogard would come by this way. Bogard was such a smart boy.

Gaddis sidled nearer to the alley.

Bogard did cut down the alley. Grinning from ear to ear Bull Gaddis trained his gun on Bogard's strong frame, and was about to squeeze the trigger when his horse nickered a warning and a sudden rush brought Gaddis around just as a

stocky body hurtled into him and something crashed solidly on his skull.

It was old Frank Hollis, who had come out the rear door of the Arrowhead to traverse the back yards to the hotel. Frank was carrying his nightly bottle of beer when he saw first the horse and then the huge bulk of Bull Gaddis behind the harness shop. Frank crept close until he saw Bull level his gun as Bogard jogged down the alleyway. Then Frank raced forward with all his strength and shattered the bottle over Bull's large head.

Bull Gaddis bowed under the crushing force of the blow and his great legs spraddled out, but he stayed on his feet and was bringing the gun to bear on Frank Hollis.

Bogard had stopped short and pivoted back at the sound the bottle made breaking on bone. Bogard's right hand whipped and flame leaped from it toward the broad hulking back of Bull Gaddis. The Bull lurched heavily forward as if somebody had clubbed him mightily between the shoulder blades. Bull's gun exploded into the ground between him and Frank as he tottered off balance. Bogard fired once more. Gaddis toppled slowly forward and landed face down in the gravel.

Frank Hollis sat down very suddenly and heavily, weak and ill and shaking all over. Bogard paused to make sure of Gaddis and went on to lift Frank upright and hold him firmly.

"Well, Frank," Bogard said gently. "You more than evened that score."

Frank shook his balding head. "Hit him hard as I could. But he still would've killed me, Bo. If you hadn't got him."

Bogard laughed softly. "What do you reckon he'd a done to me, Frank, if you hadn't skulled him with that bottle? Let's go see what happened out back."

Bogard knew it was bad by the way men looked at him and Frank as they approached the kitchen door. A man took Frank by the arm and said: "You'd better come around front with me, Mr. Hollis." Frank started to protest, but Bogard waved him on and Frank went out toward the street.

Feeling cold all over, Bogard stepped into the now-crowded kitchen where Lyle Casbier and Tom Hollis lay dead on the floor.

"It's started," Sheriff Harshany said

solemnly. "And God knows when it'll end now. Old Cas'll be in tomorrow with every gun on the C-Bar-X."

"We'll have to turn this town into a fort," Bogard said.

"I reckon we will," agreed Harshany.

"The people are ready to fight now."

"I reckon it's about time," Harshany said simply.

"The one that got Tom must've ridden out," Bogard mused.

"Rand's after him," said the sheriff. "Couldn't hold him."

Bogard smiled gravely. "Rand'll be all right."

RUNNING like a madman, Rand Hollis tore through dark back alleys and across streets toward the Chip Cross Corral and his bay gelding, holding down on the handle of his Colt .44 as he ran. His numbed mind couldn't yet grasp the horror of the fact that his brother Tom was dead, but what else could have filled him with such a terrible rage and hate? Not even the death of poor sick old Kohlmyer or the cruel scarring of Greta's fair face. Nothing but the truth that Tom had been killed, and that the man who had done it was still alive.

Rand wondered who it was, not that it made much difference. He doubted if it was Bevil, for Bevil had shown a kind and considerate streak in the dining room. It might be Doake Casbier or Bull Gaddis, Kite Kanagy, Rusty Rullo, or any of the others.

Rand was glad that Tom had got Lyle Casbier anyway, some measure of revenge for the beating Doake had given him. Surprising though, that Tom happened to be carrying that old Walker Colt. Tom wasn't a fighting man but he had died like one. He had proven himself all right.

But where was the consolation in that? Rand thought bitterly of his mother and father and Betty. They didn't care whether Tommy was a fighter or not. They knew he was a fine boy and they wanted him alive.

Panting hard, sweating in the coolness of the night, Rand raced on without any thought of his own safety or welfare. It didn't matter now. He would have faced the whole Casbier clan, and, shot through the heart, he would have lived long

enough to empty his gun into them. At the moment he was absolutely impervious to fear and danger, ready to dash into hell-fire, plunge into any torrent, battle his way through all obstacles to get at his brother's killer.

Rand crossed the last street and threw himself at the high railed corral. He was straddling the top bar when the rapid drum of hoofs reached him, and before he could turn, a bullet breathed hot and close past his cheek. Twisting his body and drawing in one swift fluid motion Rand saw two horses coming at a wild gallop, one riderless, a low-crouched figure in the other saddle. Rand recognized Rusty Rullo as he threw down and triggered.

A horse screamed above the echoing shots and the rider flew clear and slid in the dust as the animal cartwheeled end-over-end. The other horse thundered on into the night, and Rusty Rullo fired from the clouding dirt as Rand flung himself back into the street from the corral wall.

Rullo was up on his knees now and livid orange flame stabbed again through the billowing haze. Lead splintered the rails at Rand's shoulder. Laughing a maniacal laugh, Rand leaped straight across the street at his opponent. Rusty Rullo heaved himself upright, amazed to see this crazy Hollis kid driving toward him and laughing as he came, stricken so that his gun arm jerked and another shot went wild.

Then Rand's Colt blazed and Rullo felt himself blasted back, back, until he was breathless and spread-eagled against an adobe wall. Desperately Rullo hung there while his knees sagged outward, trying to bring his gun hand around to the front.

Rand Hollis was in very close for the last shot. The muzzle flash blinded Rullo's blurring eyes and the slug smashed him on the bricks. He dropped slowly, shaking his red head, his back scraping down the wall as his legs jacked out in awkward helplessness. Standing over him, Rand watched Rusty Rullo die at the base of the adobe, shot three times through the body, low down. He died snarling, as hard as he had lived.

THEN Rand turned and walked away weaving a little, shoulders slumped, the .44 still hanging in his right hand.

Now that he had done it, settled a life for a life, it didn't seem to mean anything. It didn't seem to matter at all. He felt weary and empty and without hope.

Rand walked slowly back to the hotel in a kind of trance. The gun was still in his hand, a dragging weight, but he did not know it. He sat down on one end of the front steps and leaned his shoulder against the porch post. He didn't want to see anybody. Tom was dead and Rand didn't care about seeing anyone in the world, not even his folks, not now.

Unless it was Bogard. He wanted a cigarette but was too tired to roll one. He was still slouched there when Bogard came out and studied his drawn dull face and place a cigarette in his dry lips.

"You got him, Rand," said Bogard.

Rand inclined his head and inhaled gratefully on the cigarette. "Rullo," he said. "Down by the corral."

"Three of them," Bogard murmured. "Your dad saved my life. Together we got Gaddis."

"Any more in town?"

"I don't think so, Rand."

Rand smiled wryly. "There will be—tomorrow."

"Maybe," Bogard said. "Maybe not."

Rand looked up in surprise. "How do you figure that, Bo?"

"You Hollises have done more than your share tonight," said Bogard. "It's time I went to work."

"But what you goin' to do, Bo?"

"I was goin' to wait for them to come in, but I've changed my mind."

Rand shook his head. "I don't get it."

"I'm goin' out to see Old Cas," Bogard said.

"You can't do that, Bo," protested Rand.

Bogard laughed quietly. "Got to, kid. It's my job." As the boy looked questioningly at him Bogard exhibited something in the palm of his hand. Lamplight from the lobby glinted on it as Rand bent forward to see. It was the badge of a United States Marshal.

"Waited too long already," Bogard went on. "Five men dead in Chipman tonight."

"Take me with you, Bo," Rand said.

Bogard shook his head. "You Hollises have done more than enough. You stay

with your family, Rand. And don't talk—about this."

"All right," Rand said listlessly.

"If I can't stop 'em you'll have to," Bogard said. "You and Saffell and Harshany and his boys. So be ready, son."

"We will," Rand promised. "You take care of yourself, Bo."

"Sure," Bogard smiled easily. "That's part of my business, too."

Chapter V

BLOOD IN THE LAND

IN THE morning Chipman Crossing wore the aspects of a military garrison under siege. A cordon of heavily armed sentries ringed the entire community. Men paced the streets with belted sixguns on their hips and rifles in their hands. Anxious eyes scanned the Broadlands for the approach of Old Cas and his troop of riders. Nobody doubted that the Casbiers would come in shooting, no matter what the odds were. And there were many who secretly thought Old Cas would cossack in and take the town and level it in ruin.

The forenoon passed under terrible tension but no one came, nothing happened. The long blazing afternoon began to burn itself away, and still there was no sign of an attack. Kohlmyer and Tom Hollis were buried along toward evening. The bodies of Lyle Casbier, Bull Gaddis and Rusty Rullo rested in cool cellar depths under the hardware-furniture store operated by the local undertaker.

Bogard had not returned and Rand Hollis was beginning to worry about him. Bo was probably either dead or a prisoner of the C-Bar-X. What did Old Cas care for a U. S. Marshal when his son Lyle and two of his best hands had been shot down? It had been foolish of Bo to go out there alone.

There was little or no business conducted in Chipman that day, outside of the saloons. Everybody was just waiting, waiting. Mrs. Hollis, attended by Betty, was prostrate with grief in her room. Greta Kohlmyer, her face bandaged to the eyes, was in a serious condition from shock and pain. Frank Hollis sat in a shady corner of the hotel porch with a

Henry rifle across his knees. Frank would not eat and didn't speak unless it was unavoidable. In the Arrowhead Saffell worked with a double gun belt strapped on and the shotgun lying across the bar.

Sheriff Harshany, alert, efficient and business-like, seemed to be everywhere at once, and people came to have a new respect for the trim man with his crisp-curling white hair, bright blue eyes, black mustache, and cleft chin. Harshany worked tirelessly to keep things ordered and controlled, and Honeycutt and Kopp toiled assiduously to assist him.

Rand Hollis moved restlessly about by himself, brooding and bitter. The world was an empty place without Tom. The weeping of his mother and Betty, the stony silence of his father, were more than Rand could bear.

He wished the Casbiers would come and get it over with. He didn't care what happened to him as long as he could kill a few more of them. Nothing else mattered or even existed. The need for fighting and killing had been pent up in Rand a long time. The death of his brother finally sprung it free, and now he was unable to think of anything else.

At dusk Rand had a couple of drinks at the bar with Saffell and decided to go back to the hotel and try to get his father to take some nourishment. Saffell gave him a pint of whiskey to offer Frank as an added inducement.

"Might stir up a little appetite," Saffell said. "Won't hurt him anyway. Frank must be needin' somethin'."

It was full night again when Rand left the Arrowhead and stepped into the street. The stage was just in, but for once only a small crowd clustered about the Wells-Fargo Station. The driver stood up in the boot and seemed to be making gestures at Rand Hollis, but Rand could make nothing of them as he sauntered on toward the hotel.

Suddenly a hoarse shout went up, and Rand saw a giant figure burst from the coach and bound across the street in his direction. It was Doake Casbier, looming enormous in the shadowy street, snarling like a huge beast as he yanked at his gun without breaking stride. Rand wheeled to face him squarely and reached for his own Colt. A sharp voice split

the stillness, ringing loud and clear: "Hold it, Doake!" It was Sheriff Harshany striding out with a gun in each hand. "Drop that gun or you're dead."

Doake glared at the small sheriff. "Keep outa this, Harshany! This is private."

Honeycutt stepped up behind the giant and spoke: "Not any more, it ain't! Don't move, Doake." And from still another direction Kopp lounged in with two guns leveled on the massive Casbier. Doake looked from Harshany to Kopp and swore helplessly, ragingly.

Honeycutt slipped in at Doake's back and lifted both guns from the big man's sheaths. Rand Hollis sighed and slid his .44 back into the holster.

"Come on, Doake," said Harshany. "You're goin' to jail."

"That jail won't hold me!" Doake said scornfully.

"It'll hold you awhile, I reckon," the sheriff said mildly.

"You'll suffer for this, Harshany," Doake Casbier promised.

"Sure, I always suffer," said Harshany. "Come on, Doake. We don't wanta bend any gun barrels on your noggin."

Like a giant among pygmy captors Doake moved off toward the jailhouse, watched by a curious crowd that had gathered with remarkable rapidity. "Well, I'll be damned," muttered somebody. "I sure never expected to see a Casbier jailed in Chipman Crossin'."

RAND HOLLIS walked on with a strange sense of relief for one who had been on fire for more bloodshed. He was thankful that Harshany and his deputies had appeared in time, glad that Doake was still alive. Old Cas had lost one son, just as his folks had, and that was enough.

There had been too much killing already. With an abrupt change of heart, Rand hoped that the Casbiers would not come in fighting.

Rand was in front of the harness shop when the door opened gently and a low drawling voice froze him in his tracks: "Turn around and die, Hollis." He turned and saw Kite Kanagy poised there, grinning like a coyote, his hands empty but spread-fingered for the draw.

For the second time in as many min-

utes Rand Hollis faced death, and this time there was no one to intercede, nothing to save him but his own speed and skill and nerve. Against a veteran gunman like Kanagy that wasn't much, that wasn't nearly enough.

"You'll never get outa here," Rand said, stalling.

Kite Kanagy shrugged slightly. "I've got outa worse'n this, boy. Start reachin' now. You must be pretty good if you took Rusty."

"Lucky," said Rand.

Kanagy laughed. "There ain't enough luck in the world to get you by this time, sonny. Reach and die."

Rand's gray eyes flickered up and down the street. Nobody seemed to notice them there in the shadows before the harness shop. People were still talking about the arrest of Doake Casbier.

Kanagy's coyote smile widened as he caught Rand's searching glance. "No use, kid," he drawled. "You're all alone." Rand steeled himself for the attempt.

"Not quite," a soft gentle voice put in, and Bogard was standing there, having emerged silently from the alley between the hotel and the store. "I followed you in, Kite, and I'm takin' you now."

"Nobody's takin' me," Kanagy said. "This just evens the odds, Bogard. You two—and me."

"I don't wanta kill you, Kite," said Bogard.

Kanagy laughed lightly. "Don't let that worry you, friend. I'll burn you both down."

"Don't be a damn fool," Bogard said. "This war is over."

"Not for me," Kanagy drawled. "Not while I can lift a gun."

Neither the smile nor his eyes changed in any way as Kite Kanagy's hand flashed down. With Bogard it seemed to be simply the lightning flick of his wrist, and fire blossomed from his right hand, leaping and roaring out.

Surprise shocked Kanagy's ferret face as he reeled back against the door jamb, and his gun jerked high and flamed well over Bogard's head. Then his arm dropped as if the Colt were suddenly too heavy to hold, and Kanagy hung there shuddering and shaking his head in the doorway.

"I'll—be—damned," Kanagy said, and

with a supreme effort raised the gun again.

Bogard's .44 blazed once more before Kite's barrel came level, and Kite's weapon exploded on a down-slant raking splinters from the porch floor. With an expression of infinite disgust and a grunting groan Kite Kanagy rolled off the door jamb and pitched headlong into the harness shop, dead before he hit the board. His dusty boots lay on the threshold.

"Well, he wouldn't have it any other way," Bogard said wearily. "Only two of 'em came in." He stared at the smoking gun in his hand.

"The rest'll be in tomorrow?" Rand wondered dully.

"I reckon."

"Fightin'?" asked Rand, still gazing at Kanagy's limp boots.

"I don't know," Bogard said. "I did my best with Old Cas, but I don't know."

IT WAS mid-afternoon of the next day when a rising dust cloud on the Broadlands heralded the coming of the Casbiers. The whole town watched and waited in breathless tension, and riflemen manned the barricade that had been built across that end of the main street. Obviously Old Cas was coming straight in, scornful of any deception, confident of sweeping directly into Chipman Crossing.

"Nothin'll stop them Casbiers," muttered the pessimists.

"Even Old Cas ain't tough enough to tackle a whole town," declared the more optimistic.

Rand Hollis stood with his father Frank and Bogard at the barrier and didn't know what to think or expect. If it was to be war, the slaughter would be dreadful and sickening. It didn't appear likely that any company of horsemen would hurl themselves at this barricaded street, but with Old Cas and that hellbent crew of his there was no telling.

The dustcloud unfurled closer and closer. Hands sweated on rifles and dry tongues licked at drier lips.

Six men dead in the Crossing already: Kohlmyer. Lyle Casbier. Tom Hollis. Bull Gaddis. Rusty Rullo. Kite Kanagy. But if a pitched battle were fought six deaths would be nothing. It chilled the blood to think of it. Two homesteaders and four cattlemen had fallen, and Doake Casbier was in jail. Old Cas would never be satisfied with the score that heavy against him. One son dead, the other a prisoner.

Old Cas would come in shooting for sure. Old Cas would never stop until the streets were piled with corpses and Chipman was burned to ashes and cellar-holes.

The C-Bar-X column was in sight now, moving calmly, surely, without anxiety or haste. Old Cas himself rode at the head,



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flanked by the deadpanned Bevil and the plump Sproull. Behind were Conatser, the weasel, and scores of others veiled in the sunshot saffron dust. A formidable host, but less so than in the past when those others were riding, when Lyle, Doake, Gaddis, Rullo, and Kanagy swaged in their saddles.

Old Cas's ranks were riddled. They'd be reduced a great deal more if they ever charged that barrier, or if they circled and spread to infiltrate the Crossing.

The horsemen were within range now and plodding steadily nearer. Old Cas had aged in the last few days but there was still a tremendous dignity in him. Suddenly he raised one mighty arm as if to signal an assault, and breathing ceased along the barricade. Then a white handkerchief flowered aloft in his hand, and a long-drawn sigh of relief swept the entire town. But there was still fear and apprehension.

Sheriff Harshany cupped his hands about his mouth and shouted: "You comin' peaceful, Cas?"

The high head nodded. "We're comin' peaceful."

They rode in and halted outside the barrier. Old Cas spoke briefly to them and came on with Bevil, Sproull and Conatser, leaving the main body behind. Harshany and Bogard advanced to meet them, and Rand and his father followed with a few others.

Old Cas surveyed the street. "I reckon you were ready for us."

"We had to be, Cas," Harshany said simply.

"I know," Casbier said. His dark hooded eyes blinked a bit in the sunlight, and a tremor quivered along his muscled-squared jawbones. "But there's been enough killin', Sheriff. There ain't goin' to be any more. Two of the boys came in on their own yesterday."

"Doake's all right," Harshany said quickly. "I got him in jail for safe-keepin'. But Kite's dead."

OLD Cas nodded as if he had known it. "I came in after Lyle and the others. It might do Doake some good to stay in jail a spell." He swung down from the saddle and looked at Bogard. "I'm

glad you came out to see me, mister."

"So am I," murmured Bogard.

The hooded eyes turned on Frank Hollis. "You're Hollis? You lost a boy, too. It's a hard country." Old Cas held out his hand and Frank took it firmly. Cas smiled gravely at Rand then. "I told you about that, son. But I reckon you're hard enough for it."

Rand felt like crying but he smiled back at the great old man.

"You people still wanta settle the Broadlands?" asked Casbier.

"Yes, we'd like to," Frank Hollis said quietly, with more assurance and conviction than Rand had ever seen in his father. "That's what we came out here for, Mr. Casbier."

"Well, it's your right," Old Cas told them. "You've earned it. Your blood has gone into the land now. Go ahead and file your claim."

Frank and Rand were too astonished to speak. Bogard said: "The Broadlands are open then, Cas?"

"Open, sure," Casbier said solemnly. "It's government land, ain't it?"

"It is," Bogard said. "But some people didn't put much stock in the government before."

"I didn't myself," said Old Cas. "But I didn't know the government had men like you, Bogard."

"Thank you," Bogard said, thinking that he might never be paid another tribute the equal to this.

Old Cas placed a hand on Rand Hollis's shoulders. "Go ahead and settle, you folks. I reckon nobody'll bother you out there."

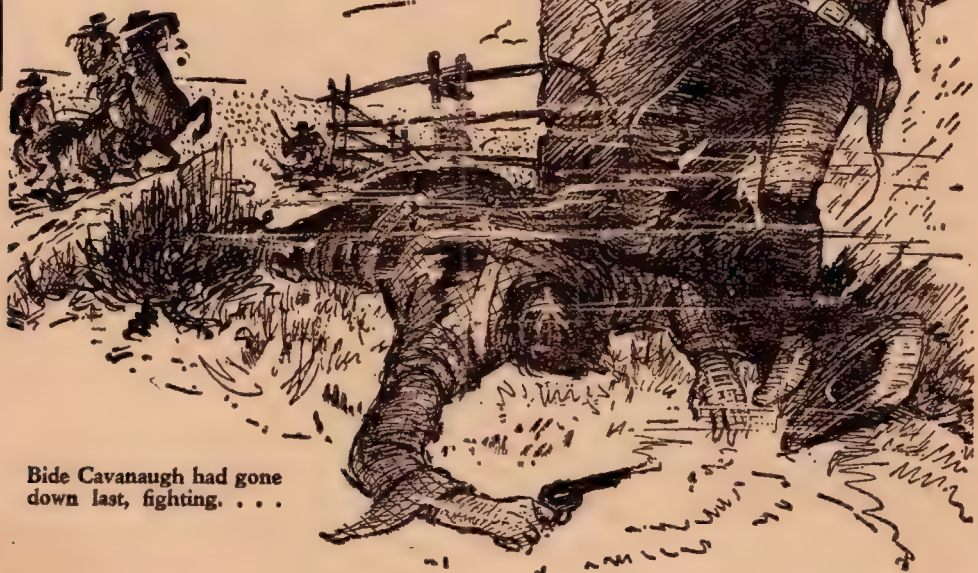
"Cas, this is the finest thing that ever happened in Broken Bow," said Sheriff Harshany with deep feeling.

"Maybe," grunted Old Cas. "It cost enough lives to be worth somethin'. Now, can my boys come in and have a drink while I get things ready for Lyle and the rest?"

"Why, they sure can," said the sheriff. "Anythin' they want, Cas."

Saffell stood his shotgun against the barricade and wiped his hands. "The drinks are on the house in the Arrowhead," he announced pleasantly. "Until the place runs dry."

"This here's a respectable town, Red. Tough trouble-makers like the Cavanaughs are all peaceable in boothill, and worms are crawlin' in and out of their red hair. I done it myself, Red, single-handed. Now, what you say your name was—Cavanaugh?"



Bide Cavanaugh had gone down last, fighting. . . .

By CLINT YOUNG

PEACE it was called and if the hombre who named it that did it as a joke, then he should have come back visiting along about the early '70's when the cattle boom was beginning to hit its stride and a hundred acres or so were worth a load of buckshot in a man's back. He'd have taken one look at the town and laughed himself half to death—providing none of Ben Sembler's gunhands took offense and sent him to join the long line

of Cavanaugh's that were finding their way to Peace's boothill.

Peaceful is just what it wasn't. Ben Sembler hit the town with a driving, soul-destroying land-hunger upon him, wearing a smooth-worn Colt and packing enough money to buy the loyalty of a dozen more.

His desire was the entire Banjo Creek basin, from the heavily timbered Carnations on the west to the bald Iron Moun-

"Peace." It Says Here!

tains on the east; from Saddle Ridge, the northern link, to Indian Badlands, two days' ride to the south. And when he was told that a good half of that range belonged to Bide Cavanaugh's C Square he looked at his informant blandly, blankly, and then thanked him for the information.

But in 1880, this unknown town-namer would have marveled at the change that had come over the town. The scattering of honkytonk barrooms had dwindled to one combination gambling house-saloon. The long, ugly, canvas-topped bunkhouse where the stage stopped had been torn down and in its place was a modern, well-appointed hotel, complete with lobby, dining room, and elite bar where a man hung his Stetson on a wall peg and kept his voice pitched low. Ben Sembler liked it that way.

And all of the Cavaughns except the last had rotted into dust, their pine headboards as weathered and worm-eaten as their bones. Nobody cared what had happened to the last Cavanaugh, the button Bide had sent away. Least of all did Ben Sembler.

Ben's Swinging Y had tossed a loop wide enough to make Banjo Creek his own private stream. Peace was his town, quiet and respectable, its sleep troubled but seldom by the memories of what that respectability had cost.

SO ON this warm spring day, when Red Cavanaugh crossed his leg-weary buckskin at the ford on Banjo Creek and pushed on into Peace, he wondered faintly if he'd gone off-track back a ways, taken the wrong fork somewhere. Peace wasn't like this when Bide had stuck him on a stage tagged for a distant relative down in Dog Town in McMullen County.

"This is Peace, ain't it?" Red asked, the drawl of southern Texas lending a soft blur to the words.

"Sure is, mister." Since it was early and the place was empty, Pete Rozell brought two glasses up on the bar and had one with the stranger. The avid curiosity of his calling was noticeable in his pale eyes and he put the question indirectly.

"Anybody lookin' for a job can find one about ten mile up the Banjo at the Swingin' Y. Dave Phelps is the man to

see. He's the one to get the job from."

"Phelps?" A mild puzzlement furrowed Red Cavanaugh's forehead. "I thought Ben Sembler was the big augur in these parts."

"Ben is." The bartender poured another, indicating this one was on him. "But Dave supers the spread for him. Ben stays in town now, mostly. Got an office in the hotel across the street."

Red followed the loose gesture, then asked, "This Phelps a good man to work for?"

Rozell's mouth twisted in a meagre grin. "Phelps is the *only* man to work for, less'n you're int'rested in one of them fringe outfits back in the Carnations. This is all Swingin' Y, town included."

"Beats all, don't it?" Red mused. He lifted his eyes and surprised a look of sharp interest on the bartender's face and then murmured, "What's on your mind, friend?"

"Nothin'." Rozell surveyed Red's face then with a close, concentrated attention. "Nothin' except I ain't heard that expression in nigh onto ten years. Not said just that way. 'Beats all.' Bide Cavanaugh used it a lot."

Red slid down the few feet of bar until he was opposite Rozell. "You won't hear it again," he told him quietly.

The bartender filled the two glasses again and without looking at Red went on. "Pete Rozell's the name. I'm one of the few left that don't wear Ben Sembler's Swingin' Y brand on their backs. Sheriff O'Connor's another, only his hands are tied. Lew Shumway down at the bank's a third."

He pushed the glass at Red. "Let's drink to your luck." They drank and Rozell added, "Which ain't goin' to be very good."

Red's eyes narrowed and the bartender jerked his head toward the door. "Here they come now."

THE swing doors bellied inward and three men entered, Ben Sembler in the lead. He was a heavy man with a heavy, arrogant walk and he said, "That him, Dave?"

Dave Phelps nodded and strode across the room, his wide shoulders and thick-

muscled arms bulging the cloth of his calico shirt. "Go to it, sheriff."

The third man was Sheriff O'Connor, a tall, raw-boned Irishman with a faintly truculent cast to his face. He stopped in front of Red and held out his hand. "I'll take that sixgun."

Red regarded him silently and then his eyes flitted to Sembler. Damn them, this wasn't the way he wanted it at all. Phelps was off his right and O'Connor was between him and Ben Sembler even if he wanted to make a play, which he didn't unless he was forced into it. He had other plans for Sembler but without his gun...

Pete Rozell's voice cut into his thoughts. "Hell, Ben," Rozell complained. "He's just a hand lookin' for a bunk. I been tellin' him to go out and see Dave."

O'Connor glanced at Rozell and then swung his eyes back to Red. "The law says no guns in town. Hand it over."

Red measured his chances and saw dismally that they weren't even fair. He looked at the twin guns Phelps was packing and pointed a finger at the Colt riding high on Ben Sembler's right hip, light glinting from its pearl handle as the man's coat swung aside with the movement of his body. "You got two laws in this town?"

That struck Sembler funny. He laughed and Dave Phelps dutifully joined in. The truculence in O'Connor's face darkened. He remarked, "Some people'd think so."

Sembler laughed at that, too, a deep laugh, faintly cynical, and Phelps echoed him. Rozell grunted wearily, "Ah, give it to him, Red," and Red unbuckled the cartridge belt and passed it over. O'Connor wheeled and Sembler followed him out.

Dave Phelps lingered. "We pay fifty a month, if you're int'rested." His eyes wandered over Red's lean face and worn range clothes. "No saddle-bums, though. You earn it."

"I'll think it over," Red said mildly.

Phelps turned to Rozell now. "You seen her yet?" The bartender shook his head and Phelps observed, "She's a looker, all right. Ben's been wantin' a wife to make queen of this place, and now he's got her. Lucy Manson. From someplace in Virginia, Ben says. He met up with her in San Antone."

Pete Rozell's glance touched Red and then slid away. "Ben's sure top dog, ain't he?"

Something in his voice caused Phelps to regard him with a swift animosity. "Anythin' wrong with that, Rozell?"

Rozell looked at him blankly. "Why, no, Dave. Only Ben's made a lot of enemies in his time. I been thinkin' that if any of them came here to get hunk with him they'd be damned fools to try to cut him own. From what I seen, Ben's weak point is that urge of his'n to be right up there with men like Lew Shumway over at the bank and Steve Wade at the Mercantile. Well thought of and respected, as well as boss of this place. Hell, no bullet'd do to Ben what robbin' him of that would do."

"You talk damn funny," Phelps said slowly, a thin vehemence edging his tone.

"It's no skin off'n my shoulders," the bartender passed it off. "I do all right, long as Ben lets me." He fumbled and came up with another glass. "Let's drink to Ben's weddin', day after tomorrow."

They drank and Phelps said, "You want that job, Red, I'll be at the hotel this afternoon. Ben's giving a party to introduce Miss Manson to the town."

AFTER Phelps left, Rozell gathered up the three glasses and threw them savagely into a box for broken glass under the bar.

"Virginia, hell! I got friends in San Antone. They wrote me that this Lucy Manson was nothin' but a waitress in the Trail Drivers Restaurant back there and that's where Ben met her. Now he's brought her here, goin' to pass her off as somethin' special, somethin' else to wear in his lapel." He paused. "Think you can use that, Cavanaugh?"

"I got somethin' else," Red murmured, "but that's good, too." He thought for a moment. "Guess I'll take in that party Phelps mentioned."

He saw her from his chair in the hotel lobby. Lucy Manson came down the stairs to where Ben Sembler was waiting for her, and the smile she turned on the Swinging Y owner was full of all the warmth and tenderness of a china doll. Red sensed then that this waitress, with little future before her, had seen Ben's

wealth and when he made his offer had taken him up on it for the security it would provide.

She was of medium height, with brown hair and dark eyes and a live, vibrant beauty that seemed forced and false, somehow. Sembler reached out to take her hand, but she moved it away from his, crooking her arm, and he touched her elbow and guided her into the crowded dining room.

Briefly, Red despised himself for what he was about to do—but he thought of Bide Cavanaugh. Bide, his full cousin, had been running the C Square along with his three brothers after Red's father died. Bringing Red up until he was old enough to take over.

Then Ben Sembler had moved in swiftly and viciously, and in one week all of the four brothers were dead. Bide had gone down last, fighting, and if he hadn't shipped Red out, he would have taken up the fight, young as he was. This would be better than killing Sembler, for it would hit him where it hurt most—his pride.

The crowd was well-dressed and friendly, even convivial. For there was a large punch bowl on a table and Ben Sembler stood by it, drinking one cupful after another, his deep laugh riding above the others. But all the while he kept a careful watch on Lucy Manson as she chatted with the other ladies, intent that she do nothing to give herself away.

Finally, when the party was well under way, Red rose and tramped over to the door to the dining room. Ben Sembler saw him coming and motioned to Dave Phelps who was lounging in the doorway, but Red sidestepped the big man quickly and was in the room.

"Hope you don't mind, Sembler," he said loudly. "Thought I'd mosey in to say hello to Lucy."

The conversation dropped to a murmur and Sembler advanced toward him, a cautious curiosity apparent in his face. Without turning his head, Sembler asked, "You know this man, Lucy?"

"I — I don't think so," Lucy said, almost in a whisper.

Red laughed and hit the flat of his hand against his leg. "Well, I never thought you'd go gettin' snuffy now that you're marryin' somebody like Ben Sembler,"

he chortled. "Why, it ain't like you to forget you were nothin' but a waitress back in San Antone."

THE two women with Lucy looked at her oddly and then at each other and Red savored the hot, wild rage that glared at him from Ben Sembler's eyes. He waited while the silence grew to a knife-edged sharpness and then he said, "Guess I sorta spoke outa turn." Then he turned to leave.

But Dave Phelps was moving in on him, his long arms hanging at his sides, close to his guns, and his bullet-shaped head moved slowly from side to side.

Sembler said, almost stuttering with anger, "The fool's drunk. Get him outside, Phelps."

Phelps grabbed Red's shoulder and swung him around and then Lucy Manson said sharply, "No, don't!" They all turned to stare at her and she said clearly, "I never saw him before, but what he says is true." She folded her hands and looked at them and when she raised her head her cheeks were pink with embarrassment.

"I didn't know when you brought me here, Ben, that you wanted me to act a part. If I wasn't good enough for you as a waitress, I don't think I could ever go on pretending, the way you told me to."

"Get up to your room, Lucy!" Sembler snapped it out, viciously, choking with an impotent, baffled anger.

"But Mr. Sembler," one of the women began. Ben repeated, "Get up to your room!"

Phelps' hand was still on Red's shoulder and he shrugged it off as Lucy Manson and the ladies quit the room. The men formed in a half circle then, watching Ben and him curiously. Ben dropped his hands to his gunbelt, loosed the buckle and let gun and all fall to the floor. "You'll pay for this, damn you!"

Sembler's hands came up and Red lashed out at him swiftly, with all the savageness of nine years' waiting behind the blow. Ben's head snapped back and he tumbled backward and Red, following him, caught his foot in the gunbelt and fell over on top of him.

Sembler's foot kicked out, driving deep into Red's neck and Red shook his head

and scrambled to his feet, hearing Sembler say, "Stay off him, Dave."

The man's eyes were wild now, glittering, and he sent punch after punch into Red's body, and Red stood there, taking it, trading blow for blow. Dimly, without being aware of it, he saw the circle closing in around them, and then he straightened, swinging upward, and his fist crashed into Sembler's face, the flesh rib-boning under the force of it, the blood smearing the man's cheek and dripping down on his torn shirt.

Ben's knee came up sharply and Red jerked aside and sank a hard right to Sembler's throat. Sembler's eyes popped and he clutched at his throat, gasping for breath, and Red drove in on him, mercilessly, pounding, smashing. Sembler gave ground, scattering the men behind him, and Red stayed on top of him. When Sembler fell, he kneeled over him, throwing great sledging blows at the man's face.

There was a savage curse behind him then and he was drawing a deep, shuddering breath as the gun barrel hit him solidly, tearing into his ear, knocking him sideways on the floor where he blinked stubbornly at the growing blackness and then lay silent and motionless.

SHERIFF O'Connor put down the lad's head of water and bent over Red, shaking him again. Red weaved back to consciousness, feeling the cold wetness on him, and when he forced his eyes open he saw he was on a bench in the sheriff's office, with the sheriff and Pete Rozell watching him closely.

"I got his horse outside," Rozell said immediately. "You better give him back

his gun so he can get on out out here."

The truculence was gone from O'Connor's face and he remarked soberly, "That's worth my job, Pete."

"So's lynchin'!" Rozell said sharply. "And that's what Dave Phelps'll be up to when he gets enough men in here from the Swingin' Y!"

"Hell," O'Connor told him sourly, "Sembler may be thinkin' I'll let him go. He'll have some men out there waitin' to bushwhack him."

"That's the chance Cavanaugh has to take," Rozell shook Red fully awake then and told him where they'd most likely be. Across the Banjo, where the trail cut into the Iron Mountains, there was a high, barren bench where two men with rifles and shells could hold off half an army.

"So when you ford the Banjo you cut straight south, down and into the Badlands. They'll pick up your trail, but you got a fresh horse and —"

He broke off and Red saw the sheriff turn toward the door, his gun lifting into his hand.

Lucy Manson was standing there.

Red got to his feet, his whole body a long, dull ache, the water still running down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Miss Manson, believe me. I'm sorry."

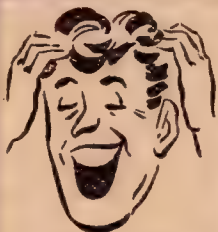
"It's better this way," she said softly. She came over and put her hand lightly on his shoulder. "For me, that is. I didn't know what Ben Sembler was like until I came here. And after you . . ." She stopped, then said, "The women told me what they really think of him."

"What will you do now?" he asked.

"The stage leaves in half an hour for San Antonio. I'll be on it." She smiled



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again, a full, tender smile, wheeled, and then at the door she paused. "Thank you. And good luck."

They stared at the spot where she had been and Rozell observed, "You done somebody a good turn, Red."

LATER, the sun had set when Red Cavanaugh pulled himself up on the buckskin and took the gunbelt Sheriff O'Connor handed to him. Pete Rozell had gone out and come back with the word that Dave Phelps had sent three men down down the trail ahead of him.

"They'll be waitin' for you," he warned, "so turn south soon as you cross the Banjo."

Red nodded absently. "Where's Sembler now?"

O'Connor grunted his disgust. "In the hotel probably. That man's got more brass. He'll get himself patched up and be down there tonight laughin' it off as a joke that went sour on him."

The buckskin moved under Red's knee and he looked down at them. "I'll be seein' you." He watched the irritation mount in their faces and he murmured, "This range belonged to C Square once, you know."

Leaving town, he rode slowly, not glancing back, for he knew that Sembler would be counting on Phelps to take him in the jail, if he was still there. Or on the men down the trail ahead of him if O'Connor let him pull out.

The picture of Ben Sembler brazenly appearing in the hotel lobby, facing up to these people who would listen to him as long as he held Peace and the Banjo Creek basin in his grip, riled him. He cursed himself for not looking up Lew Shumway at the bank right off.

Instead, he's seized on a chance to humble Sembler in front of everyone, and in accomplishing that he'd hurt this girl, Lucy Manson, who'd come into it innocently. He wished now that somehow, some way, he could make amends to her. The thought that there'd be no chance for that, that he'd never see her again, made him vaguely uncomfortable.

Still, he'd found out one thing. Ben Sembler had not softened. The man who'd fought to grab this range would fight to keep it. And he had Dave Phelps and the Swinging Y crew to back him up. They

were in Peace right now, and Peace was Ben Sembler's town.

Red rode on a ways, and when it was full dark he swung off the trail and put the buckskin into a steady lope to the north.

He cut in a wide circle, closing the arc as he moved down on Peace, and when he saw the faint light of the town he left the buckskin in the brush and went on on foot, threading his way between the shacks and through the rubbish-strewn alleys until he came out in the yard back of the hotel.

Soft yellow light diffused through the windows at the sides, up front, but the rear was dark and Red entered the kitchen and moved soundlessly until he was in the deep shadows at the back of the dining room.

Through the archway, he could see Ben Sembler in a chair in the middle of the lobby, a white bandage covering his left jaw. He was holding himself stiffly, talking through mashed lips to a gray-haired man beside him.

RED saw that Sheriff O'Connor was there and so was Pete Rozell. So were the men who'd been at the party that afternoon, and he wondered which one was Lew Shumway, the banker. He scanned them for Dave Phelps' big form, and when he didn't see him he felt unaccountably angry.

Then realization came to him and he thought, I wanted him in on this, too. Both of them. Get it over with.

Sembler finished what he was saying and swung around to look at the sheriff, who was leaning against the desk. "So you let him ride out?"

O'Connor bent his head and studied the carpet. "Had to, Ben." He wet his lips and there was no mockery in his voice. "Guess you didn't know it, but Dave Phelps was fixin' up a necktie party for him."

"That so?" Ben rubbed a hand reflectively over his good jaw. "This thing didn't turn out the way I planned," he admitted. "But he beat me fair and I'm glad you turned him loose, whoever he was."

"Don't you know who he was?" Pete Rozell blurted suddenly.

"Why no." Sembler leaned forward. "Do you?"

"Hell, yes! Name's Cavanaugh. Old man owned the C Square."

Sembler swung a furious glance on the sheriff. "And you let him go!" he bel-lowed accusingly.

"Sure." O'Connor fixed Rozell with a wintry stare and then faced Ben Sembler. "We didn't know it until he was on his horse, ridin' away from us," he lied, trying to get out of the spot Rozell had put them in.

"Why damn you, you should have—" Sembler broke off then. Part of his crew



Part of Sembler's crew would be waiting. . . .

would be waiting for Cavanaugh on the trail and he smiled, crookedly because of the bandage. "We're well rid of him," he told them all flatly.

The gray-haired, dignified man sitting near Ben asked quietly, "Cavanaugh say anything about coming back?"

"Him?" Sembler sneered. "He won't be back."

"He's back now," Red said from the shadows.

Sembler's head swiveled toward the dining room and Red stepped out into the light. "Right here," he added.

With a lurch, Ben Sembler was on his feet, his hand clawing for his gun, but Sheriff O'Connor leaped to his side and knocked up the hand. The sheriff's Colt drew a small circle on Red's middle. "Put up the gun, Cavanaugh."

"Sure," Red obliged. He slipped the

gun back into his holster. "I came back for C Square, Sembler."

"Is that all?" The man's tone was heavy with contempt. "Dave Phelps is outside. Go out and tell him that. He'll be glad to see you."

Pete Rozell moved then, turning and facing away from the room toward the door. A sixgun was under his coat, jammed into the waistband of his pants, and he grasped the butt, loosening it. Red looked over the men in the room.

"Which one of you's Lew Shumway?" he demanded.

"I am," the gray-haired man said.

"You hear anythin'?"

Shumway nodded. "Just this morning. A letter came in on the stage."

Ben Sembler's hard eyes flitted between them. "What letter's this?"

"A letter from Austin, Ben," Shumway informed him. He glanced at Red and then back at Sembler. "Ben, by what right do you hold Banjo Creek basin?"

Sembler regarded him coldly for a moment. "Free range belongs to any man who can take it and hold it, don't it?"

THE banker steepled his fingers thoughtfully before replying. "Free range does, Ben. But it seems that Banjo Cheek basin isn't free range and never was. After Texas fought Mexico for independence the state government gave land away to the soldiers as a sort of bonus. That letter came from the land office in Austin. The Cavaughns didn't preempt their C-Square spread, they owned it."

"You moved too fast for your own good, Sembler," Red said harshly. "Back then, the carpetbag outfit runnin' Texas didn't give a damn what happened in Peace. But now things are different. They let me dig into the records and they told me C Square still belongs to me."

He watched Sembler narrowly, seeing the man's faint puzzlement grow into a wild, rebellious dismay. All that he'd built up here was slipping away from him, being torn from him by the last of the Cavaughns.

"So I'm takin' it back," Red went on relentlessly. "You stole it and now you're goin' to jail."

Sembler's gun hand jerked up in front

(Continued on page 129)

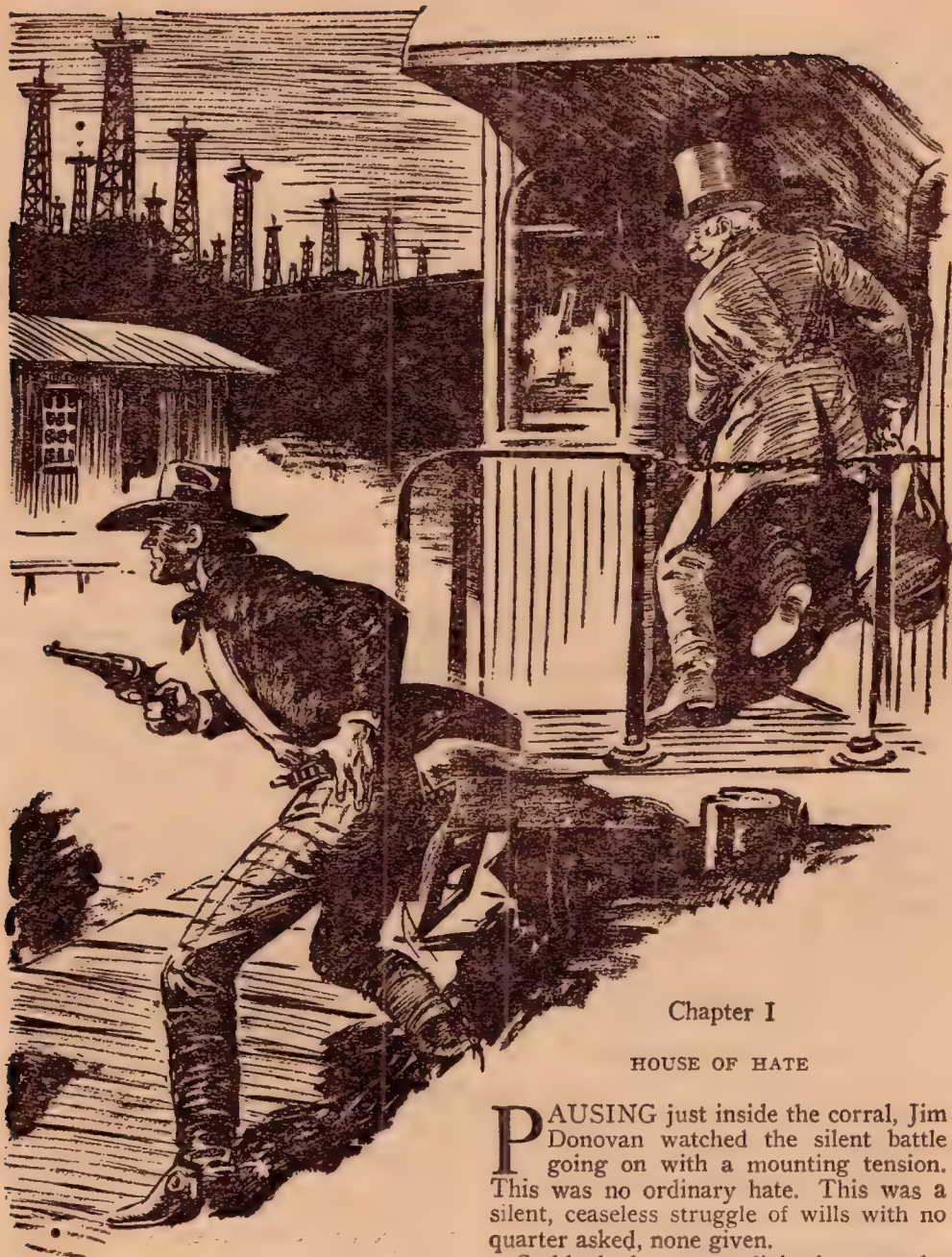
What strange, hypnotic power did big Jack Krieg, oil combine king, wield over men and women of the lawless, black-gold Strip? . . . For Wild Jim Donovan, sworn to kill him, dared instead to let him live and thereby unleashed the full fury of a blazing inferno on himself and all the muckers who believed in him!



One of Krieg's gunmen thumbed a shot at the Colonel's back.

A Smashing Novel of a Deadly Oilstrip Blow-up

The Wildcatter War



Chapter I

HOUSE OF HATE

PAUSING just inside the corral, Jim Donovan watched the silent battle going on with a mounting tension. This was no ordinary hate. This was a silent, ceaseless struggle of wills with no quarter asked, none given.

Suddenly, however, a lightning move by the Palomino, a clever counter move by the man, and it was all over—with the stallion securely snubbed.

Moving in quickly, the man slapped on a saddle and mounted. The Palomino's powerful shoulder muscles rippled, but he made no further move to fight back.

Yet that still look in those red-rimmed

By MAX KESLER

eyes made Donovan shiver. The stallion's hatred for the man was almost human. Yes, Jim Donovan thought, almost like my own.

He rested cold, brooding eyes upon Krieg now—eyes that looked often into the past and remembered.

Casting loose the snubbing rope, Jack Krieg noted the dusty Levi-clad stranger for the first time.

"Well, what the hell do you want?" he snapped. "And just who are you anyway?"

"Just another driller," Donovan drawled. "Looking for a job."

"Sorry, but I've got full crews." Krieg's voice was irritated. "Try Luke Prentiss south of here."

"Thanks." Donovan propped his tall, lean figure against the corral and studied Krieg.

Close to six feet, well-knit, with bold features and an easy grace in the saddle, Krieg would have been handsome save for his mouth. But that mouth, thin and ruthless, betrayed his real nature.

Donovan's eyes shifted to the Palomino. He hesitated, then said quietly, "I'll give you three hundred for that stallion—cash."

Krieg swept Donovan's worn jeans and scuffed driller's boots suspiciously. Drillers out of work didn't usually have that kind of money. Still, these were good times and pay was high.

"Hell, what do you want him for?" he demanded. "Can't you see he's a killer?"

"I can see that he hates you, that's all." Donovan looked at the loaded quirt in Krieg's hand. "Some day he'll kill you."

An unpleasant smile curled Krieg's mouth. "No, he'll never get me. I'm going to keep pounding his thick skull with *this*." The quirt slashed down viciously between the Palomino's ears. "Until he admits I'm his master."

That was a mistake. With a cat-like leap, the stallion slammed against the corral, almost knocking Krieg loose. Krieg cursed and brought the quirt down savagely—once, twice, three times. The Palomino staggered. His head drooped, and he stood motionless, with still, unblinking eyes.

Mulik had tried and failed. But he would try again. He would never stop

trying. The hate was still there—deep and strong and cunning.

With an effort, Krieg turned in the saddle. His face was like clay. "Help me down, will you?" he rasped. "My leg's broken."

Silently, Donovan complied, bracing himself as Krieg eased to the ground.

Sweat ran freely down Krieg's face. Blood trickled from his mouth where he had bitten it against the pain. He jerked his head toward the two-story mansion a hundred yards away.

"Think we can make it to the house?"

Donovan's mouth twisted. "I can," he retorted. "What about you? You're pretty good at dishing out punishment. Can you take it?"

For just an instant, Krieg's eyes flicked to the Palomino. Then he said harshly, "I can take anything, fella. Let's go."

ALTHOUGH the next few minutes must have been a nightmare to Krieg, he bore up under the ordeal without a sound.

The man's stoicism aroused a smoldering fury in Jim Donovan. He wanted to see Krieg suffer. He wanted to jeer: "Suffer, damn you—just like you made Anne suffer! Don't die and cheat justice."

As they neared the house, a big man with a bristling mane of iron gray hair came out on the veranda, stood watching them an instant, and then hurried forward.

"What the hell happened, Jack?" he demanded, draping Krieg's free arm around his shoulder. "Tormenting Mulik again?"

"That's my business," Krieg said between pain-clenched teeth. "Remember it, Colonel."

The Colonel flushed. "Damn you, Jack!" he exploded. "If you weren't my son-in-law, I'd like to see Mulik stomp you to—"

"Shut up, Colonel," Donovan snapped. "Can't you see that Krieg's in no shape to argue?"

As they reached the veranda, the Colonel shouted, "Sylvia! Open the door. Jack's been hurt."

Then he whirled on Donovan. "Just who the hell do you think you're talking to, fella?"

"Frankly, I don't give a damn," Donovan retorted. "You've no business argu-

ing with an injured man. Why don't you help him?"

The Colonel scowled. He started to say something, but shut up as a dark-haired girl appeared in the doorway. At sight of Krieg, she stopped, her hand going to her mouth.

She wore a low-cut, flame colored dress and a diamond pendant that set off the rounded whiteness of her shoulders. She was slim, above medium height—and she was remarkably beautiful.

This much Donovan noted before the Colonel said, "Nothing serious, Sylvia. Just him and Mulik again. He'll live."

Sylvia Krieg regained her control quickly. Her eyes, intense, brooding ones, rested briefly on Donovan. Then she said in a low voice, "Take Jack to his room, Jubal. I'll be up in a minute."

She disappeared inside, and they heard her calling, "Nana! Mr. Krieg's been hurt. Send Sam in after Dr. Carter."

Donovan was struck by her coolness. She had displayed no more concern for her husband than for a total stranger. Evidently Krieg was not even popular in his own home. First the Colonel, now Sylvia Krieg. Perhaps these two might . . . He shrugged and forgot the thought as he tried to get Krieg upstairs.

As they reached the upper landing, Krieg's injured leg struck the last step. He groaned and went limp in their arms. Nor did he move after they got him to his room.

During the entire action, Donovan was struck by the grim irony of the situation. Jim Donovan, helping a man whom he intended to destroy. But then he didn't really want Krieg to die—not just yet.

Straightening from the bed, Donovan met Sylvia Krieg's dark eyes. She was studying him with a strange intentness. She said, "Thank you for your help, Mr.—?"

She was the most beautiful woman Donovan had ever seen. And in view of his motives, probably the most dangerous for him. If she knew who he was, and what he was here for . . . He was taking no chances.

"If you need me," he said evenly, "I'll be downstairs," and he was gone before she could frame the question that was on her lips.

FROWNING, Sylvia Krieg turned to Colonel Jubal Ames and asked, "Who was that man, Jubal? I've never seen him before."

Busy cutting away Krieg's boot, the Colonel retorted, "I don't know. He was helping Jack to the house when I met him. Blunt fellow. Gives orders as though he was used to it."

He dropped the slashed boot and looked at her. "You know, once I caught him staring at Jack. And there was the hate of the devil in his eyes. He's known Jack somewhere before. Or else . . ."

Sylvia's eyes widened. "You don't suppose it's *him*?"

Jubal Ames rose. "I hope to hell it is," he said brusquely.

"You *really* hate Jack don't you?"

"Of course I hate him," Jubal snapped. "Turning you against me the way he has."

"Don't blame that on Jack," Sylvia retorted. "Your trying to marry me off to Matt Blake for his money did that. Money money, money—that's all you'll ever think about!"

The Colonel's face darkened. "At least Matt was human," he said. "But, no, you had to spite me. You had to marry a brute who beats his horses to death because he can't tame them. I'm surprised he hasn't kicked down that door between your rooms and used the same technique on you."

"Why, you rotten old fool!" Sylvia lashed him sharply across the face. "At least I hate him for what he *is*—not because I can't dig him for money to bring in dry holes."

Then realizing what she had done, she stared helplessly at Jubal. The Colonel's face was white, expressionless. Sylvia's shoulders drooped.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'm just so mixed up I can't—"

But the Colonel had already disappeared.

Downstairs, Jim Donovan surveyed the Krieg living room with moody eyes. Even here were the marks of Anne's influence—not Sylvia Krieg's. But then everything Jack Krieg was today, Anne had made him. She'd given him money, position, prestige. And in return. . .

With a weary gesture, Donovan's head fell back against the chair—and his mind

slipped back along the years, thinking of everything that had led up to the present.

There had been just the two of them—he and Anne. They had grown up together, inseparable. Those first few years had been poverty stricken, but to them it hadn't mattered. Life was still good.

Then their father, a wildcatter, had brought in a long shot gamble in Tideout, and the Donovan fortunes had changed. Mike Donovan saw to it that his children wanted for nothing.

At sixteen, Anne had gone off to a finishing school. Mike Donovan, feeling the oil field to be no place for a motherless girl, made the decision.

Jim, in his last year at the University, was studying geology. For Mike, foreseeing that science would someday replace such primitive methods as creekology was looking to the future.

He had not lived, however, to witness this new development in the oil game. Jim was working for the Penn Oil and Gas Illuminating Company when he'd received word of his father's death. A heart attack had carried the old man off.

Mike Donovan had dealt squarely with his children. Under the terms of his will, they had shared equally in his million dollar estate. Jim to receive his outright, Anne hers upon her marriage.

Immediately, Anne had been besieged by a horde of fortune hunters. Young, impulsive, she'd completely lost her head and married a handsome, down-at-the-heel oil speculator by the name of Jack Krieg.

In Oiltown, Jim had received the news with considerable misgivings. A check on Krieg had not reassured him. Krieg had been mixed up with a number of women before.

Other than that, however, Krieg's record was neither good nor bad. He was regarded largely as a man of potentialities. He was shrewd, clever, ruthless—and he knew the oil game. Only his lack of capital had kept him down. And Anne's fortune had solved that.

By the end of the first year, Jim Donovan had ceased to worry. Anne's letters were happy, filled with praise of Jack Krieg's growing successes. Perhaps that was the reason Jim hadn't worried when the letters had stopped.

NOW heading up his own company, he had not given the matter serious thought for several months. Immersed in his work, he forgot time, and even Anne. When he did remember, it was too late. A hasty trip to Tideout had ended up in a cemetery.

The whole tragic story Donovan had pieced together from Anne's friends. Somehow, Krieg had talked Anne into assigning him complete power of attorney over her estate. Things had gone along very well for six months after that. Then the month before, Krieg had disappeared. Where, no one knew.

Within a week, Anne had discovered that he'd sold her out, lock, stock, and barrel. And he'd skipped out with everything.

Anne had had friends, all eager to help. Yet she hadn't needed them, Donovan thought now. She should have come home to him. But then she always had been a proud one—too proud.

Pregnant, with less than fifty dollars in her purse, her world lying in ruins about her, she had taken what she considered the only way out—an overdose of a sleeping draught.

Returning to Oiltown, Jim Donovan had turned the company over to his partner, Dan McKee, and started out on Krieg's trail. Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kansas, and finally, the Cherokee Strip—all had grown to know the lean, silent stranger who searched every face so intently.

Hunting, always hunting. Always on the move. Always searching for someone who knew a Jack Krieg. Trying to find a man he'd never seen.

But he knew the type. Cold, ruthless, vicious. By now, with Anne's money to back him, he was probably successful in a big way.

One, two, three years. And now at last he'd found his man. Krieg hadn't even bothered to change his name. It was that arrogant contempt that had trapped him.

The first bartender in Marlow that Donovan had asked had said, "Jack Krieg? Sure, I know him. Lives in a two story house 'bout a mile north of here. Friend of yours?"

"Not exactly," Donovan had said grimly, and left.

That first sight of Krieg in the corral had aroused the blood-lust in Donovan. He'd wanted to kill Krieg, then and there. But he'd quickly conquered that impulse.

Jim Donovan did not believe in revenge. It could not undo the original wrong. He did, however, believe in justice.

But since Krieg's principal crime—Anne's death—lay outside the legal definition of murder, Donovan had set himself up as judge, jury, and prosecutor. And he'd found Krieg guilty.

The judgment? Krieg was to be broken first, just as he had broken Anne. Then he was to be destroyed as a menace to society.

Jim Donovan had appointed himself to execute the terms of the sentence. He thought of Krieg lying upstairs now, injured. The fear that Krieg might cheat justice by dying gripped him. Donovan wiped moist hands on his Levis and stared at the winding stairway.

Without knowing why, he became conscious of a sudden hostility in this gracious home—of strange hates that swirled and eddied beneath its placid surface.

Chapter II

BLACK-GOLD MAN-BUSTER

COLONEL JUBAL AMES' back was ramrod straight as he marched down the stairs. Yet that harsh military bearing was but the outer defense of a man who was, by nature, weak—but not bad.

Destiny had chosen for the Colonel a career filled with glory but little money. And at the same time, she had ironically cursed him with the feverish spirit of the

wildcatter oilman. Which is to say that the Colonel sank every dollar he could beg, borrow, or steal into drilling oil wells—most of them, unfortunately, dry holes.

Coming down the stairs now, the Colonel was seething. Jubal Ames, retired Colonel, a veteran of two wars and countless Indian campaigns, slapped by a woman! And his own daughter at that.

Damn Krieg anyway—turning Sylvia against him with lies. Doing everything he could to keep Jubal down. Well, one of these days he was going to get rid of Krieg—some way, somehow.

Jubal paused at sight of the Levi-clad stranger in the living room. His eyes narrowed. He was recalling the hate he had surprised on the stranger's face earlier. Now, if this man was who Jubal thought he was . . .

The Colonel was smiling as he strode across the hall.

The sound of footsteps jerked Donovan back to the present. He rose quickly as Jubal Ames entered.

"Well, Colonel?"

Jubal Ames flopped into the nearest chair. "Leg's broken," he said. "That's all. Just what happened out there anyway?"

Donovan shrugged. "The Palomino slammed him against the corral. Krieg's a top rider, but he's too rough on his horses."

"Rough, hell!" the Colonel flared. "He's a damned dirty beast. With people as well as horses."

For a moment, Donovan eyed him shrewdly. Then he said, "You don't like Krieg, do you, Colonel? Why?"

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"Like him?" Jubal Ames' laugh was brittle. "Hell, I hate his guts. He's turned my own daughter against me. Besides, if he'd loan me the money to spud in with, I could make a million dollars on a wildcat venture of mine. But he's too damned—"

He flushed and abruptly changed the subject. "By the way, I don't recall seeing you around here before."

Donovan was tempted to lay his cards on the table. Hatreds such as were loose in this house thirsted for revenge—and they might be turned into any channel.

There was no doubt that Jack Krieg despised the Colonel. And in turn, Jubal Ames hated him for failure to finance his wildcat ventures, as well as this business about his daughter.

Then there was Sylvia Krieg—beautiful, married to the wealthiest man in the Strip—who hated both her father and her husband.

Donovan hesitated. Here was a situation made to order for his purpose. But. . . He gave Jubal Ames a steady look.

"Curiosity killed a cat once, Colonel," he said grimly. "It could kill a man." He rose. "I'll be on my way."

"Wait!" the Colonel rose hastily.

"Yes?"

"Did you ever hear of a girl named Anne Donovan?"

ANNE! Donovan stiffened. He met Ames' eyes squarely. "Never heard of her," he said. "Why?"

"There's a rumor circulating that Jack ran out on a girl in Pennsylvania by that name several years ago. Took everything she had. She's supposed to have killed herself.

"It seems she had a brother named Jim, who headed out after Jack as soon as he found out. Since then, the fellow's haunted the oil fields from Pennsylvania to California looking for Jack."

"So?" Donovan hedged.

The Colonel smiled grimly. "I'd like to meet him. We might have a lot in common."

"Such as?"

"Such as common hate for a beast."

Donovan hesitated. He was tempted to show his hand. He was sure now of the Colonel. But then there was Sylvia

Krieg. He could not be sure of her, yet. . .

"Sorry, Colonel. I haven't seen your man. But if I do." . . . His smile was thin. "If I do, I'll let you know."

The Colonel's eyes flickered. "Any time," he said quietly. "We might be able to work out a deal."

Donovan gave him a steady glance. "Maybe he'll take you up on that, Colonel," he said, and went outside.

"What about that job?" Jubal Ames called after him.

"Don't think I'd be interested, Colonel," Donovan replied, and swung into the saddle.

Touching spurs to the gelding, he headed out across open country. A half mile from town, he passed a heavy-set, balding man whom he guessed to be Carter.

After that, only the prairie lay before him, studded with the gaunt, naked outlines of countless derricks.

Matt Blake leaned back and regarded the sign—*Matthew Blake, Pres.*—on his desk with smug complacency. He was proud of the fact that, at thirty-six, he had worked up from a mere teller to the presidency of the Cherokee National Bank.

Already graying about the temples, and with a corpulent body of which he was secretly ashamed, Matt Blake was the product of his own environment. His heavy face wore the trained, expressionless mask of the typical banker.

He raised small, icy eyes now as Daniels, his chief teller, ushered in a dusty, Levi-clad stranger.

Blake's mouth tightened. Another down-at-the-heel roustabout, he thought, looking for a loan. Having thus formed his opinion, he automatically made his decision.

"No personal loans," he snapped, "except on guaranteed security."

Jim Donovan flushed. A tour of the town's saloons had turned up one important bit of information. Jack Krieg did all his banking at the Cherokee National Bank. Now Donovan wanted to know just where Krieg stood financially—how much it would take to break him.

"Come down off your high horse, mister," he said coldly. "I want to open an account here."

Matt Blake looked up sharply. It irri-

tated him to think that he had misjudged his man.

"Daniels will take care of you," he said, curt-voiced, and went back to signing papers.

Anger began building in Donovan. Pulling a long manila envelope from his pocket, he said, "Here's a draft drawn on Chase National of New York City. Maybe you'd like to look at it."

Matt Blake would, and he did. Then he sank weakly back in his chair. "Jim Donovan! President of Donovan Oil of Pennsylvania." He sounded like a parrot with a sore throat. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You're supposed to be here to serve people, whoever they are," Donovan reminded him grimly. "Not insult them. Now." He held out his hand. "I'll take back that draft. Maybe the Oilman's Bank—"

"Wait!" Blake forced his paralyzed mind into action. "For God's sake, Donovan, be reasonable. If the bank directors found out I lost a half million dollar account . . ." Blake mopped his forehead.

ACROSS the desk, Donovan smiled. This was an unexpected break. He'd come here prepared to have to wrangle for the information he wanted. But with Blake obviously on the defensive. . .

"All right, I'll strike a bargain with you," he said. "I'll deposit this draft here in exchange for certain information."

"Anything I can do to help," Blake replied quickly. "Just what do you want to know?"

"I want a full statement on Jack Krieg's financial status."

"Jack Krieg?" Blake stared at him in surprise. "Hold on, Donovan. Krieg's a big man around here. If he found out—"

"That's your worry," Donovan cut in. "Well?"

Blake squirmed uncomfortably. "I can't do it under banking regulations, Donovan," he protested. "Except, of course, by court order. Anything else, though."

"Forget it." Donovan rose. "Maybe the Oilman's Bank—"

"No, wait!" Panic gripped Blake. His banker's calm was gone. If he lost this account. . .

Suddenly his long smoldering hate for Jack Krieg flared up. To hell with Krieg anyway. Hadn't Krieg already taken Sylvia away from him? Why should he, Matt Blake, lose a bank presidency because of the son.

Rising, he strode to the door. "Bring me the Krieg accounts, Daniel," he called.

He was frowning when he returned. Somewhere back in one of the neat pigeon holes of his banker's mind he had stored a memorandum about this man Donovan. But it kept eluding him now.

"I suppose you've got a reason for this," he said. "Old unfinished business."

Donovan? Suddenly the probing fingers of his mind located that pigeon-holed memorandum. *Jim Donovan?* Of course, Who else?

He leaned forward, smiling. "I couldn't place you for a minute, Donovan," he said.

"But I've got it now. Anne Krieg was your sister. That's why you're here, to even the score with Krieg. Right?"

"Right," Donovan said tightly. He had come here prepared to reveal his identity, if necessary. But Blake's quick identification came as a surprise. "So what?"

"So. . ." Blake's voice was grim. "You're not the only one who has it in for Krieg. The whole Strip hates him, including me. If it hadn't been for him, Sylvia Ames would have . . ." He broke off, flushing.

Donovan stared at him. That this paunchy, cold-eyed young banker was in love with Sylvia Krieg and hated Jack Krieg enough to want him out of the way, was an unexpected boon. Apparently everyone in the Strip hated Krieg. But none of them had the guts to go gunning him down.

Daniels, a thin, frustrated man of fifty, brought in the Krieg records and scuttled out again like a frightened rabbit.

"There you are," Blake said, shoving the records across the desk. "Cash on hand, securities, investments, and personal liabilities."

There was no sound in the room for a full half hour. Then, frowning, Donovan shoved back his chair and rose. Without a word, he strode from the room. He had kept his end of the bargain. On Blake's desk lay the half million dollar draft.

Outside, he headed slowly down the

boardwalk, his frown deepening. Those records had told him one thing. It was going to take more than just money to wipe out Jack Krieg.

DURING the next few days, Jim Donovan circulated among the oil-smeared, overall-clad men who poured into town from sunrises to sunset from the surrounding leases.

There was no siesta hour in Marlow, no let-up in the endless roaring life of this frontier boomtown. From dawn to dusk, bearded drillers, tool dressers, roustabouts, and hangers-on rubbed shoulders with speculators who counted their dollars in terms of millions rather than hundreds.

Saloons, honkytonks, and gambling houses ran twenty-four hours a day. Percentage girls raked in enough to retire on within a year. Paupers became millionaires overnight. And millionaires of one day were bumming the price of a drink the next.

Here and on the big wooden derricks studding the sky-line for miles around, was adventure, excitement, back-breaking labor—and violence. Here was a way of life—brawling, lusty, free for the taking.

Moving quietly along with the roaring tide, Jim Donovan kept his eyes and ears open, and his mouth shut. Gradually, from hours spent in touring the town's saloons, emerged the vicious pattern of Jack Krieg's activities in the Cherokee Strip.

Jack Krieg was not only hated, he was thoroughly feared. Turning up in the Strip the year before, he had soon bought into the powerful Spencer-Landers combine. Like big oil syndicates everywhere, this organization was trying to absorb the Strip independent operators.

Within three months, Krieg had taken over the combine. Ab Spencer and Tony Landers were now merely figureheads. Krieg tolerated them only because they proved useful. That was common knowledge.

But the independents, led by a hard-bitten old timer named Tom Jeffries, were proving hard nuts to crack. Although weakened by Krieg's repeated attacks on their leases—theft of whole strings of tools, dynamiting of bore holes, and open killings of a number of operators—they

were still in there slugging plenty hard.

For all that, however, they were waging a losing battle. Two months before, Krieg had taken over the town's only two oil-field supply houses. It had been a severe blow to the independents. But defiantly, they had begun hauling in equipment from Duncan, ten miles away.

That had helped until the combine started raiding their wagons on the return trip from Duncan—burning the wagons and wrecking the equipment. Since then it had been a tough haul.

Now, with their wells sabotaged and their cash exhausted, they literally had their backs to the wall. It was simply a matter of time before Krieg would wipe them out.

This much Donovan learned in those first few days. And it forced him to speed up his plans. For Krieg had to be broken before he broke the independents.

It was this rapidly deteriorating situation that made Donovan call on Colonel Jubal Ames again.

SEATED on the veranda of the Krieg house, Jim Donovan studied Jubal Ames with thoughtful eyes. The Colonel, slumped comfortably in a cane bottomed chair, waited.

"All right, Colonel," Donovan said abruptly. "You know who I am and why I'm here. Last week, you made it pretty clear you'd like to sit in on this game. How do you feel about it now?"

Jubal Ames smiled. "I never change my mind, Donovan. Let's have it."

"To begin with," Donovan said. "I checked on Krieg at the Cherokee National Bank. Krieg's in damned good shape. Two million assets, a million and a quarter liabilities. Not too much cash though—a hundred thousand."

The Colonel scowled. "Too damned much working capital," he said. "Unless Matt Blake doctored those records. He hates Jack because of Sylvia. But he's not fool enough to lose a two million dollar account in order to ruin him. Watch your step with Matt."

"That report was straight," Donovan told him. "I had Blake on the spot. He had to tell the truth."

"Uh-huh." The Colonel thought carefully a moment. Then he said, "Jack's a

gambler. A smart man with money might be able to clip him for that cash reserve. But oil *land*—and he's got plenty—that's hard *land* to take away from a man."

"*Land!*" Donovan sat up suddenly. "By God, Colonel, you've hit on something! Does Krieg have valid leases on this land of his?"

Jubal Ames stared at him. "Hell, I don't know. Flying Lance, the Cherokee chief, signed them. Why?"

"Just this," Donovan was eager now. "There's a question as to whether the tribes have the right to enter into lease contracts. If Krieg's leases are invalid, we'll have him in a tight spot. That would take not only his land but most of his producing wells also."

"Sure, but how are you going to prove they're invalid?" Jubal Ames looked dubious. "And even if they were, Flying Lance would just have to give Jack back his money. That wouldn't help."

Donovan grinned. "Sometimes, Colonel, a man like you can live and fight with Indians all his life and still never know them. Hell, man, that money went for liquor and women long ago."

"Look." He leaned forward. "You're going to Washington, Colonel. You have influence there. If those leases are valid, you're going to see that the Secretary of the Interior declares them invalid."

"Me, go to Washington?" The Colonel stared at him. "Are you crazy, man? What about Jack? What will I tell him?"

"Tell him anything," Donovan retorted. "Tell him you—"

"Perhaps first, you'd better tell his wife what this is all about."

Both men whirled, startled—and Donovan came to his feet.

Sylvia Krieg, attractive in a blue gingham dress, surveyed him with cool eyes from the doorway.

"Yesterday," she said, "you evaded giving me your name. Now, I think you'd better tell me just who you are."

The Colonel cleared his throat. "You were right, Sylvia. This is Anne's brother, Jim Donovan."

Sylvia caught her breath sharply. She stiffened then and her eyes grew wary. "Why did you come here? What do you want?"

"Justice." Donovan's voice was flat and

emotionless. And his eyes were hooded.

After that, the silence clung heavily to them—like fog over troubled waters. Each was trying to analyze the other, with the Colonel nervously clearing his throat in the background.

Finally, Sylvia said coolly, "You understand, Jim Donovan, that I'll fight you every step of the way. That I'll not let you get away with this thing."

Donovan's lip curled. "You mean you'll protect a thief and a murderer? Is that it?"

His contempt cut through Sylvia's calm. "What do you expect me to do?" she flared. "I'm thinking of my own security. I like what I've got here, Jim Donovan. I intend to keep it."

Picking up his hat, Donovan said quietly, "What you have here isn't yours, Mrs. Krieg. It's Anne's. Yet whatever happens, I promise that you won't suffer."

He turned to Jubal Ames. "I'm staying at the Driller Hotel, Colonel. I'll expect you there tomorrow afternoon, ready to leave."

"But, Jim," the Colonel protested. "I just can't—"

But Donovan was already in the saddle and swinging away.

Behind him, Sylvia Krieg called out calmly, "I'm warning you, Jim Donovan, keep riding until you reach Pennsylvania again—if you want to keep on living!"

SMOKE plumed up from the dinky locomotive's stack. On the station platform, Jim Donovan and Jubal Ames turned as a shiny buckboard raced down the street.

Jack Krieg, his broken leg in a plaster cast, yanked the team up viciously before the station. In the back seat, two hawk-faced men wearing crossed gun belts straightened and flipped away their quir-lies.

Jubal Ames' face whitened. "Watch it, Jim," he whispered. "That's Buck Masters and Whitey Carp with him. Both killers."

Looping the reins over the dash board, Krieg leveled his eyes on Jubal Ames. "Get in this buggy, Colonel," he said harshly. "You're going back with me."

Ames face reddened. "The hell I am," he snapped. "I'm reporting to Washing-

ton. I've been called back to active duty."

"Cut the acting, Colonel," Krieg sneered. "You're just a penny-ante player trying to sit in on a game too big for you. Sylvia warned me you were up to something. Well, forget it."

He turned hard, flat eyes on Donovan. "This is between me and my friend here. Well, Donovan? Now that you've found me, make your play!"

He was tensed, his body twisted awkwardly because of his broken leg. Behind him, Whitey Carp and Buck Masters moved further apart.

"Not just yet, Krieg," Donovan said softly. "First I'm going to break you, the same way you broke Anne. Then I'll kill you."

"Just like that, huh?" Krieg sounded amused. "Why wait, Donovan? Why not now?" His hand was hooked in close to his .45.

"The time's not—" Donovan broke off as the conductor yelled, "board!" and signalled the engineer. The train started rolling.

"All right, Colonel!" Donovan snapped, and gave Jubal Ames a shove. Grabbing his suit case, the Colonel stabbed for the hand rail as the last coach swung past.

"Get that fool, boys!" Krieg shouted, and grabbed for his gun. But, hampered as he was by his leg, his draw was slow.

Buck Masters and Whitey Carp were faster. As the Colonel ducked inside the coach, Whitey bounced a slug off the door near his head.

A second later, a bullet slammed Whitey back against the seat. Buck Masters, his gun just arcking up, cursed as Donovan's next shot tore the .45 from his hand. Donovan's draw had been that fast.

"Hold it, Krieg!" Donovan swiveled. "I don't want to kill you, not yet anyway."

Krieg hesitated, his gun half cleared. Then he shrugged. "If that's the way you want it, Donovan, okay. But I don't break easy. You're going to have a fight on your hands, fella."

Picking up the reins, he snapped, "Cut out that whining, Whitey. Hell, you act like you've never tasted lead before."

The surrey lurched forward as Krieg whipped the team into a fast trot.

Slowly, Donovan made his way back to the Driller. Behind him, the locomotive

gave a triumphant blast as it disappeared around the bend. But that triumph was only partly reflected in Donovan.

Frankly, he was worried. Sylvia Krieg had spilled the truth sooner than he had expected. Now—although Krieg didn't know the exact nature of Jubal Ames' trip to Washington—his suspicions were aroused. And by his unhesitating order to get the Colonel, Krieg had starkly revealed his ruthlessness.

Now that Krieg knew Donovan's purpose here, he wouldn't stand around and twiddle his fingers. Krieg wasn't the type for that. One of these days, he'd strike.

Donovan was still cursing Sylvia Krieg as he mounted the steps of the Driller.

DURING the next two weeks, Jim Donovan adopted a policy of watchful waiting. Until he heard from Jubal Ames there was nothing else he could do.

Meanwhile he studied the progress of Krieg's combine against the little operators. There was no doubt that Krieg was rapidly pinching them out now. Three wells were dynamited within ten days. A supply train from Duncan was ambushed and the equipment destroyed.

On the other hand, a steady stream of freighters pulled up before Krieg's two supply houses. Loading up with drilling bits, auger stems, six-inch casing, and even small boilers, they pulled away again. Krieg was pushing ahead with his own drilling operations.

It was two weeks before Jubal Ames' telegram reached Donovan. Or almost didn't reach him. A half hour later, and he would never have received that wire.

Donovan was frowning as he came out of the Driller and headed for the railroad station. Jubal Ames' long silence had him worried. He was depending heavily upon the Colonel having Krieg's leases invalidated. Otherwise, it was going to be a tough job to break Krieg. And simply killing Krieg would be a farce of justice. First, he had to suffer.

Before the telegraph office, Donovan hesitated. It was still early, but you could never tell. He shrugged and went inside.

As he entered, the young woman talking to the telegrapher broke off, her face flushing guiltily.

At sight of Sylvia Krieg, Donovan's

mouth thinned. "Good morning, Mrs. Krieg," he said stiffly. Then to the wizened telegrapher, "Anything for me, Lew?"

Lew Jenkins squirmed uneasily. "Why—why—" he stammered, and shoved a crumpled yellow slip across the counter. "This just came in for you, Donovan. Figured you'd be around."

"Uh huh." Donovan glanced at the wadded telegram. "But not before you had a chance to destroy this message. Right, Lew?"

"Now, look here," Jenkins blustered. "You accusin' me of—?"

"I'm not accusing you of anything," Donovan retorted. "I'm telling you. For a consideration, you showed Mrs. Krieg this telegram. Well, wise up to things, fellow. That's a good way to lose your job, end up in the pen, *or* stop a bullet!"

White-faced, Jenkins scuttled back to his clicking instrument.

Frowning, Donovan faced Sylvia Krieg. "You're clever, Mrs. Krieg," he said coldly. "But not clever enough. There's nothing you can do about *this*." He held up the crumpled telegram. He'd read it.

SECRETARY INTERIOR VOIDING
THIRTY KREIGS TOWNSHIPS. AP-
PROVING TWO. REST UP TO YOU.
RETURNING IMMEDIATELY. AMES.

Sylvia Krieg flushed. "One has to fight fire with fire, Jim Donovan," she said. "And as for that telegram, we're not beaten yet. Jack still has some money left. And you're forgetting the combine."

"Don't count too much on Schuman and Landers," Donovan retorted. "They hate Krieg for taking over the way he did."

"Maybe, but they'll stick," Sylvia predicted bitterly. "They've got to, or go down with us."

Something in her voice touched Donovan then. For, sensing the uncertainty of the life she must have led with the Colonel—never sure of money, a home, anything for that matter—he thought he could understand her desperation now.

She didn't love Jack Krieg. Nor did she pretend to. But he represented a security she had never known before. And she'd fight to keep that security.

"Look—be sensible," he said quietly.

"Why don't you get out of this thing, Mrs. Krieg? I promise, you'll not lose in the long run. But keep fighting me, and I'll break you along with Krieg. You understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Donovan." Sylvia's full lips drew back from white teeth. The color was high in her face. "I understand—and here's your answer!"

The sound of her hand across his cheek sounded like a pistol shot in the small room. Lew Jenkins looked up, startled, from his instrument—and smiled maliciously.

"If that's the way you want it," Donovan said tightly, "that's the way it will be." Turning, he strode from the room.

Behind him, Sylvia Krieg's jaw hardened. She went quickly outside, climbed into the shiny tandem before the station, and whipped the horses into a fast trot toward home.

Chapter IV

THE WAR-BIRDS HOVER

DOWN the street, Jim Donovan paused as angry voices beat through the Gusher Saloon's swinging doors. Then, frowning, he shoved inside.

Although it was not yet noon, the place was half-filled with oilmen. And in one corner, Donovan spotted half a dozen cattlemen, looking strangely out of place here. Everyone's eyes were fixed on the three men standing ominously alone at the long bar.

The tall, massive man with graying hair and straggy, longhorn mustache Donovan recognized as Tom Jeffries, the leader of the independent operators. A man whose name, colorful nature, and wildcat successes were legion in the oil fields.

Facing Jeffries now were two men Donovan had never seen. Yet he knew who they were—Ab Schuman and Tony Landers, Jack Krieg's partners in the combine.

Individually, neither man would have attracted more than a passing glance. But together, they made the strangest looking team in the oil game.

The big one, Ab Schuman, almost equalled Tom Jeffries' six feet five. His partner, Tony Landers, ran to the other

extreme, standing only five feet four. And whereas Schuman was cadaverous, hollow-eyed, and mean-mouthed, Tony Landers looked like a roly-poly, pink-cheeked drummer always about to break into a laugh.

Donovan knew all about them. They'd come out of nowhere ten years before and virtually opened up the Strip field alone. Shrewd, hard-working, but treacherous as sidewinders, they knew the oil game from A to Z.

From the beginning, they'd fought the cattlemen who opposed the coming of oil. They had neither won nor lost. But with the absorption or murder of a good many independent oilmen and the formation of the combine, they had been able to maintain a state of armed truce.

Thus it had gone for years. The cattlemen siding the independents. The combine whittling away at the little operators to reduce their strength and weaken the cattlemen also.

Now, Donovan thought, Kreig had evidently decided to step up the tempo. For Schuman and Landers were obviously here to knock off Tom Jeffries. With their leader dead, the independents were likely to panic. And that would be the end of them.

Was Kreig making this move in order to clear the way for an all-out fight with Jim Donovan? If so, what—? He broke off, listening.

"You've had your warning, Jeffries," Ab Schuman was saying. "Keep your supply wagons off the Duncan road. There's not room enough for them and the combine's too."

A dull flush crowded Tom Jeffries' big, rugged face. Hooking his hands into his gun belt, he took a step forward.

"Well, then, keep your damned combine wagons off the road," he snapped. "Krieg's cut off our supplies here in Marlow. But, by God, he's not going to keep us from freighting in equipment."

"That's big talk, Jeffries." Schuman shot a quick glance at Tony Landers. The chubby man nodded and moved to one side. "Feel like backing it up *now*?"

A flat silence gripped the crowd. Men edged quickly out of the line of fire. All save a slender, cold-eyed man who worked around behind Jeffries.

Donovan caught that movement and swiveled, tensing. He wasn't going to stand for any back-shooting. Then he swore softly.

Buck Masters, Jack Krieg's gun-hawk! So that was the way it was planned. Jeffries caught between three fires, without a chance.

Donovan kept his eyes glued on Masters, waiting for the play.

"Well?" Schuman sneered. "What's the matter, Jeffries? Lost your tongue, or just your guts?"

"Why, you dirty—!" Jeffries shouted, and went for his gun.

Things happened fast then.

SCHUMAN and Landers exploded into action. Behind Jeffries, Buck Masters' hand streaked hipward. And Jim Donovan's draw was lightning fast.

Buck Masters yelled and dropped his .45 as Donovan smashed his elbow with a bullet.

Their guns half cleared, Schuman and Landers froze in surprise. No amateur himself, Tom Jeffries' finger was already trigger-curved.

"All right you two," Donovan snapped, covering the combine men. "Drop those guns, pronto!"

Silently, Ab Schuman complied. He knew when the odds were against him. Next time . . .

Tony Landers cursed and swung his .45 around.

Donovan parted his hair with a slug. "I said, drop that gun!"

For a tense instant, Landers hesitated. His round face was twisted with fury. Then his gun clattered to the floor.

"Now, get." Donovan jerked his head toward the door. "And take your gun-hawk with you. He won't be much help for a while."

Slowly, Schuman walked over to him. "So you're this hell-bender who's after Jack's scalp," he sneered. "Well, get this, Donovan. You can blow Krieg's guts out, and I'll thank you for it personally

"But don't start mixin' in a fight where you ain't holdin' cards. Keep out of this thing, else something's liable to happen to you."

He whirled on the tubby Landers. "Let's go, Tony," he said. "You, too,

Buck." Then, followed by his partner and the wounded Masters, he strode outside.

Slowly, Tom Jeffries slid his gun back in its holster. He gave Donovan a long, searching glance.

"I ain't askin' why you sided me, Donovan," he said. "I'm just sayin', thanks, fellow."

Donovan shrugged. "You and everyone else know why I'm here. I'm out to break Krieg, and the combine is Krieg. Any part of it that gets in my way . . ."

He left the sentence unsaid. But the crowd knew that Jim Donovan had thrown his hat into the ring with the independents and ranchers against the combine.

Gradually, men began to sift back to the bar and the clink of glasses wiped out the silence. There was even laughter, for the atmosphere was charged now with a hope that had not been there before.

In the far corner, the half dozen cattlemen turned thoughtful, not unfriendly glances upon Donovan. They were playing a waiting game.

"Come on, Donovan, I'll buy you a drink," Jeffries said. "And I want you to meet Lance Carpenter. Owns the Triangle T and heads up the cattlemen around here."

Frowning, Donovan followed the big independent leader toward the ranchers' table. He'd gotten mixed up in something now that was none of his business. To hell with this independent-combine fight. He was here for only one purpose—to break Jack Krieg.

Still, with the independents and cattlemen throwing their weight behind him, his own position would be greatly strengthened. And he knew he was going to need all the help he could muster.

Despite Jubal Ames' success in Washington, Krieg wasn't finished. He was in a tight spot, yes. But Krieg's kind didn't give up easy. Just what his next move would be when Sylvia Krieg told him about that message, Donovan could only guess.

With federal law enforcement agencies so far away, Krieg might well choose to defy the Secretary of the Interior's invalidation of his leases. And he had enough men in the combine men to make a U. S. Marshal think twice before trying to enforce that order.

Or he might even try a sudden and decisive showdown battle with the independents and ranchers. If he could swallow up their holdings, he could still stand the loss of those leases.

But whatever he chose to do, he'd have to do it fast. And he wasn't one to sit around and be squeezed out without a fight.

PAUSING now before the ranchers' table, Donovan felt the appraising impact of a half dozen pair of eyes brought to bear upon him.

"Howdy, Lance," Tom Jefferson said, addressing a slim man with a wind-burned face and shrewd eyes. "Meet Jim Donovan. You saw what just happened. Reckon we can't count Donovan on our side."

Lance Carpenter thrust out his hand. "Glad to know you, Donovan. Heard a lot about you. Word gets around, you know. Sit down."

Booming for drinks, Tom Jeffries turned back and made the introductions.

"Donovan, meet Les White, Circle J; Tod Malone, Bar X; Fred Parker, Angle Bar, and Will Brown, Double Eagle."

Donovan sized up each man in turn. Steady, firm-eyed, clear-jawed, these men would do to ride the river with. Men who loved peace, enough to fight for it. Men with guts.

The ranchers' handclasps were firm and their smiles ready. It was Lance Carpenter who expressed what all of them felt.

"We're indebted to you, Donovan," he said. "None of us saw Buck Masters. He'd have drilled Tom here sure as hell. Would have served Tom right, too, going for a gun against Schuman and Landers together."

Big Jeffries grinned ruefully. "I reckon I did lose my head," he admitted. Then his face clouded. "But, by God, I've taken all I'm going to from that damn combine!"

He turned to Donovan. "You know the story. Since Krieg bought out the town's only two supply houses, we've been having to freight in our equipment from Duncan. And Krieg's been making that road hell for us. Wrecking our wagons, dynamiting bridges, and shooting our drivers.

"Now he's thrown a bunch of freighters

on the road himself, just to mess things up. They deliberately drop a wheel on a narrow road and hold us up for a day at a time. Or they get stuck in the mud when there's no excuse for gettin' stuck. And if we try to move them off the road, they start trouble.

"Dammit, he's got us independents with our backs to the wall. We've practically had to shut down drilling operations. Can't replace broken drilling bits; can't set casing because we ain't got it; can't set up new rigs because we can't haul in timber. Matter of fact, Donovan, we can't do a damn thing!"

Donovan frowned. "Why don't you ship by rail? There's a line between here and Duncan."

"Sure," Jeffries conceded. "But the freight rates would break us. Too damned high. No, we've got to haul it in ourselves, or go down. Ain't no other way."

"You say you're not getting anywhere that way," Donovan reminded.

"That's right." Tom Jeffries' face hardened. "But we're making a last-bid gamble to shove a big freighting convoy through from Duncan tonight. Fifty wagons loaded with equipment and supplies.

"If Krieg tries to stop them, he's going to run into hell-fire and damnation. We're staking our entire future on those wagons, Donovan, and we ain't dodging a fight."

"And if they don't get through?" Donovan asked.

"If they don't . . ." Jeffries' face was grim. "If they don't, we're dead ducks. We'll have to sell out to Krieg."

Frowning, Donovan turned to Lance Carpenter. "Where do you cattlemen fit into this game?"

CARPENTER shrugged. "We don't like oilmen, Donovan. But oil is here to stay. We know that. Big combines like Krieg's don't give a damn about cattlemen. If they think there's oil on your land, they try to buy up acreage. If we refuse, they start poisoning water holes, shooting our cattle, and then us too.

"But Tom Jeffries and his independents are fair men. They drill on free range. They respect our rights. If Krieg wipes them out, we'll be too weak to fight back. You can take it from there yourself."

Donovan said nothing. He was think-

ing that by now, Sylvia had probably told Krieg about that message from the Colonel. And Krieg was no doubt raging wild.

With thirty-two townships under lease, a lot of producing wells, and a sizeable cash reserve, Krieg had been confident he couldn't be broken. Yet the impossible had happened.

Now, most of his land and producing wells were being taken away from him by the government. If he tried to start over again, he'd meet a merciless resistance from independent operators and cattlemen alike.

His only hope lay in wiping out that shipment of supplies from Duncan. Loss of that equipment would break the independents. He still had enough cash to buy them out at squeeze-out terms. If he could do that, he'd still be on top.

Tonight would be showdown, Donovan thought. Krieg would strike at that supply train with every gun he had, hard and fast and murderously. He had to be stopped.

Swiftly, Donovan outlined to the cattlemen what they did not know—his success in having Krieg's leases invalidated. That Krieg was now as much behind the eight-ball as the independent-cattlemen group.

"He'll try his best to wipe out that equipment train," Donovan told them. "He's got to or he's finished. We've got to stop him with force. Lead with lead!"

"You're shutting down the entire field tonight, Jeffries. You've got to bring those wagons in under heavy escort. They'll need all the protection you can give them. How many men in the independent set-up?"

Jeffries' big face lighted. He relished the thought of a showdown fight. "Around a hundred and fifty, counting crew," he said. "And you're right. We've got to move fast. I'd better start rounding up the boys."

"Count us in on this, Tom," Lance Carpenter said quietly. "We can muster fifty good men. Where will we meet you?"

Jeffries gave him a steady look. "Thanks, Lance," he said. "I'll not forget this. Say, seven o'clock a half mile north of town. No use letting Krieg get wind of what's up."

"We'll be there," Carpenter rose, and his friends with him. Facing Donovan,

he said, "You're fighting Krieg now, Donovan, not so much because of what he did to your sister, as for the rest of us. You'll do, fellow."

Silent, the group broke up. Lance Carpenter and his friends headed for their spreads to mobilize their men. Tom Jeffries left to shut down the field and alert his independents.

Jim Donovan ankled down the street toward the Driller Hotel. He had promised to meet the rest at seven o'clock at rendezvous. Meanwhile, he wanted to think.

For the first time, he realized that he was caught up in a bigger, far more important struggle than his own personal one. This was no longer a question of attempting to impose merely a personal justice. One man, Jack Krieg, was ruthlessly destroying a group of honest, hard-working oilmen and ranchers, and holding back Progress. He must be stopped.

Not that Donovan had forgotten Anne. He hadn't. But in this way, Krieg would not only pay for the wrong he had done Anne but to society in general.

If he paid at all. If he didn't turn the tables and wipe out Jeffries and Carpenter and Jim Donovan along with them. Krieg was sure to make a desperate fight to-night.

Donovan was frowning as he entered the Driller. For upon the outcome of to-night's action rested the destiny of the entire Strip.

Chapter V

BLOW-UP IN BLACK HATE

THE frantic, persistent beat of knuckles upon his door cut through Donovan's sleep-drugged mind. He jerked awake, sat up on the edge of the bed, and reached for the .45 on the table. He was wide awake now, tensed.

The room was in semi-darkness. He cursed and came off the bed. It was late. He'd lain down for a moment's rest, and fallen asleep. Jeffries and Carpenter were probably already at rendezvous.

"Who is it?" he snapped, crossing the room.

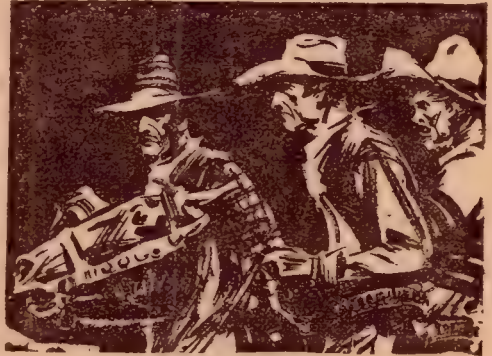
"For God's sake, Jim—let me in!" Sylvia Krieg's voice replied. "I've got to see you!"

Sylvia Krieg! What was she doing here? Quickly, Donovan opened the door. Tall and lovely, Sylvia stared at him with frightened eyes. Her face was pale, her lips scarlet.

"What is it?" Donovan drew her inside. "What's happened?"

Sinking into a chair, Sylvia buried her face in her hands. "Everything," she said. "I've been a fool, Jim. When I told Jack about that telegram he went berserk. I had to come here and warn you."

"About what?" Donovan said impatiently. He had but little respect for a



Krieg's killers. . . .

woman's empty regrets. He was thinking that Jeffries and Carpenter were out there waiting for him now. And as for Jack Krieg, if he was on his way here for a showdown, so much the better.

Sylvia raised a strained, frightened face. "Having those leases invalidated was a serious blow. But Jack still thought he could save himself by wiping out the independents' equipment train tonight. Now he's found out that Jeffries plans to shut the field and bring those wagons in.

"Jack hasn't enough men to break through that escort, Jim. He's beaten, and he knows it. There's only one thought in his mind now, to destroy the entire Strip field along with himself."

"For God's sake, get to the point!" Donovan shook her roughly. "I'm in a hurry. What's Krieg up to?"

"He's sending his main force out to feint an attack on those freighters," Sylvia said breathlessly. "With the independents riding out to protect it, the field will be left entirely unprotected.

"While his men keep Jeffries and Carter busy fighting them off, Jack's going

to fire the independents' storage tanks. He'll wipe out the entire field, Jim. You've got to warn Jeffries."

Donovan swore fervently. "Has Krieg already gone?"

The girl nodded. "Half an hour ago. He and Buck Masters, and Whitey Carp, and Tony Landers. They rode toward Tom Jeffries' lease. Jack hates Jeffries, you know. If he ever sets fire to those tanks, Jim, the whole field will go up in flames."

Slapping on his gun belt, Donovan snapped, "No time for me to warn Jeffries. Wrong way. That's your job. You'll find him a half mile north of town. Tell him to burn leather for his place."

"But, Jim," Sylvia protested. "You can't—"

Donovan was already in the hallway and hitting the steps three at a time. He raced through the lobby and outside.

The street was deserted. An ominous quiet lay over the town. The hitch racks loomed emptily before stores and saloons. Every able-bodied man had already left for rendezvous. And Krieg's men were on their way to attack the equipment train.

Forking his horse, Donovan raced out of town toward Tom Jeffries' lease.

THE sun had long since dipped below the Sierra Ladrões. Now the country was a blurred, indistinct outline of rolling prairie. Donovan cursed and touched spurs to the gelding.

He knew Krieg's type. Cool, shrewd, ruthless as long as they were winning. But when they knew the game was up, they went haywire. It was one of the inconsistencies of their character. Now, fear trickled down Donovan's spine.

Krieg's plan was devilishly simple. While his main force attacked the supply train, he and a few picked men would touch off the storage tanks. And the oil stored in those tanks represented the total wealth of the independents. Without it, they would be penniless.

And the Strip field, concentrated as it was, could easily be wiped out. Wells studded the area at less than hundred-yard intervals. One fire would start a series of chain explosions that would flare from tank to tank.

Too, even though the pumping system had been shut down, explosions would

occur within the oil-filled lines themselves—destroying the entire system. There wouldn't be a chance.

Suddenly, less than a quarter of a mile away, the whole sky erupted in a blinding sheet of light. A second later, Donovan felt the earth tremble and heard the dull roar of the explosion.

Without slacking speed, Donovan raced toward the blazing, skeletal outline of Tom Jeffries' well. He cursed as huge, billowing clouds of orange-red flame boiled skyward from the shattered derrick. Around the storage tank itself, oil spilled, running in all directions, flaming. Flames raced across the ground in foot-high, writhing sheets.

The terrified gelding spooked, almost throwing Donovan. Cursing, Donovan veered away from the blazing tank wreckage. Krieg wouldn't be there anyway. He'd have blown the tank from a safe distance.

Suddenly, a cream-colored stallion streaked away a hundred yards to the right. Wheeling, Donovan spurred after it. He'd recognized the Palomino stallion, Mulik—and Jack Krieg's figure in the saddle.

Bunched closely behind Krieg were a half dozen other riders. They were heading toward the heart of the field.

Yanking his Winchester from its boot, Donovan slammed a quick shot at Krieg's shifting figure. He missed, but got a man just to one side of Krieg.

As the raiders scattered, he heard Krieg yell, "Hell, it's only Donovan alone! Buck, Whitey—get him!" Then Krieg was racing toward the center of the field a quarter of a mile away.

Slugs whined all around Donovan as he spurred in hot pursuit. Suddenly two riders, spread out and bent low in their saddles, charged in at an angle.

Whitey Carp and Buck Masters—gunhawks with their wings half clipped, but still able to shoot left-handed.

A slug whammed into the cantle of Donovan's saddle. Another raked his arm from wrist to elbow. Then his Winchester was cracking.

Whitey Carp fell forward, grabbed for his saddle horn, and then plunged to the ground. Whitey had killed his last man.

A steel-jacketed .30-30 slug caught Buck Masters in the chest. He threw up

his arms and went back and out of the saddle.

A third horseman slashed in from the right. A short, fat fellow with a blazing .45 in his hand, and a smile on his round, chubby face.

Grimly, Donovan smashed that smile, and the face with it, into a bloody mess. Tony Landers held the saddle for a good twenty yards before he pitched to the ground.

THE whole thing lasted only seconds. But it gave Krieg a chance to increase his lead. With the nearest well less than two hundred yards away, he was spurring the Palomino savagely. But Mulik was fighting the bit hard now. Somehow, he sensed that Krieg, with his injured leg, was no longer master of the situation.

Behind him, Jim Donovan swore as the gaunt outlines of a veritable forest of derricks rose against the orange-red sky. If Krieg ever touched off one of those wells, the whole field would go up in flames.

Yanking the gelding to a sliding halt, Donovan whipped up the Winchester. Pain laced up his injured arm, but he managed to line Krieg in his sights.

Krieg was a fast-moving target, dimly outlined in the wierd light. He twisted around now, a sixgun in his hand.

Gently, Donovan squeezed the trigger.

Krieg slammed forward in his saddle, his head snapped back. An iron will kept him grimly erect. His .45 winked three times, and Donovan's gelding bolted as a slug burned its flank.

Cursing, Donovan grabbed for the pom-pom, missed, and hit the ground rolling. The Winchester went flying through the air. Somewhere in the darkness, he could hear the pound of the gelding's hoofs.

Half stunned, he scrambled to his feet. No time to hunt for the Winchester. Besides, its barrel would be dirt-clogged anyway. He drew his .45 and began running.

Fifty yards ahead, Krieg was firing at a tank in the hope that a chance spark might ignite the oil. He was reeling drunkenly in the saddle, held there only by sheer willpower.

Suddenly, that iron will collapsed, and he pitched headlong to the ground. But even then he would not quit. As Donovan

came charging in, Krieg stopped him with a bullet through the chest.

Donovan went down hard. He lay there, coughing weakly, with a giant hand squeezing the air from his lungs. Ahead of him, he saw Krieg crawling forward on his belly. There was a match in Krieg's hand. If he ever reached the oil-soaked ground around that tank...

"Don't, you fool!" Donovan shouted. "You'll blow yourself to kingdom—" A spell of coughing shut him off. He fought to bring his gun up, but the strength was not in him.

Suddenly, Mulik, screaming his hate, wheeled and thundered back. Months, he had waited for this chance. Now with Krieg on the ground...

His cream-colored hide gleaming in the wierd light, Mulik reared up, his forefeet pawing the air.

Twisting desperately away, Krieg jerked up his gun. The hammer fell on an empty shell. Krieg screamed as Mulik's forefeet slashed down, sharp, thudding, backed by a thousand pounds of hate and fury.

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Twenty yards away, Donovan fought to line his sights on Mulik, but was seized by a sudden fit of coughing. Then a swirling black cloud settled before his eyes, and he fell forward on his face.

The last thing he heard was Jack Krieg's screams, and the thud of Mulik's pounding forefeet . . .

SUNLIGHT slanting across his face cut through the darkness. He stirred, lay there a moment with the hum of low voices in his ears, and then opened his eyes.

After a moment, he closed his eyes again. The low murmur of voices ceased. Quick, light footsteps crossed to him and a cool hand touched his forehead.

"Jim?" a soft voice whispered. "Jim, are you awake?"

Vaguely, Donovan stared up at Sylvia Krieg's anxious face. Behind her, Jubal Ames was a blurred image that gradually took shape. Donovan frowned. What was he doing here in Sylvia's room?

"The independents, the field?" he demanded, trying to sit up. "Tell me, what happened at the—"

Sylvia must have read his mind. She said gravely, "It was all over in less than an hour, Jim. The combine's attack on the supply was intended only as a feint—nothing else.

"Well, it didn't work out that way. The independents and cattlemen carried the fight to them. Jack's men never had a chance. Not a half dozen got away alive. Ab Schuman was killed trying to rally them.

"I got to rendezvous in time to warn Jeffries. But by the time he and part of his men reached the field, you'd finished the job.

"Buck Masters, Whitey Carp, and Tony Landers were all dead. Two more raiders were badly injured. They found you close to one of the tanks. And a few yards away, Jack—"

She faltered.

"Jack reaped what he sowed," the Colonel said grimly. "Everywhere he went, he sowed hate. Well, in Mulik he sowed so much hate that the harvest killed him. He didn't die from your bullet, Jim. Hate killed him. Mulik's hate."

"That supply train put them back on

their feet," he explained. "Of course, Tom Jeffries' well and tank were wrecked. But his friends pooled resources and replaced his lost oil and equipment.

"Now they're drilling new wells every week. Really opening up the field. Oil is here to stay, Jim, and it's going to make the Strip."

Donovan stared at him, frowning. Then he said, "You know, I still can't figure Krieg going haywire the way he did. It just doesn't make sense that he'd kill himself to wipe out the rest of the Strip."

"He didn't intend to," Sylvia said bitterly. "He meant to destroy the field, yes, because he was beaten here. But not himself. You see, Jim, he drew out every dollar we had left in the bank before he started on that raid. He was planning on running out on me, just like he did your sister, Anne.

"Evidently, Matt Blake suspected what Jack was up to. And because Matt . . ." Sylvia's face colored. "Because Matt loved me, he refused to give Jack the money. Jack must have killed him then. At any rate, Daniels, the cashier, found Matt dead before the open vault the next morning. Well, that's it."

Donovan lay there studying her with grave eyes. Finally he said, "You've been through a lot, Sylvia. Too much. I know this isn't the time." He reddened. "But I—well, I—you—that is—"

A smile curved Sylvia Krieg's lips. "For a man with a quick mind and a quick trigger," she said softly, "you talk awfully darn slow."

Bending, she kissed him full on the mouth. "As for the time, darling, there's none like the present!"

Somehow, in that moment, Jim Donovan had the strange feeling that his sister, Anne, was smiling her approval from Sylvia's dark, shining eyes.

With a little sigh, he relaxed. Sunlight slanting in through the open window full full across his face. Jim Donovan was smiling.

Near the window, the Colonel cleared his throat. "Well," he said gruffly. "I guess this is one husband we can both agree upon!"

The light in Sylvia's eyes was answer enough.

THE END

Rope's End

By
**JOHN D.
FITZGERALD**

Ropes were more deadly than sixguns in that strange frontier duel.

IN THE year 1891 at Mancos, Colorado, one of the strangest duels in the history of the West took place between Pedro Garcia and Juan de la Cruz, two Mexican cowboys. The duel was fought because both men were in love with the same señorita in New Mexico.

The two men were trail riders, riding herd on cattle being driven from New Mexico to Colorado. During the drive the trail boss was able to keep them apart. After the herd was delivered, the trail herders laid over in Mancos for a well-earned rest before starting back.

The crew began drinking heavily and the quarrel between Garcia and Cruz burst into flame. Garcia was the more even-tempered of the two and tried to avert a showdown with Cruz who had the reputation of being a bad hombre. Cruz kept forcing the issue with insults until Garcia had to agree to a fight or admit he was a coward.

Cruz wanted to fight with knives because he was an expert with them. Garcia wanted to settle the quarrel with guns because he was an expert marksman with a six-shooter. When they couldn't agree one drunken member of the trail riders pointed out that about the only thing at which both men were equal was roping.

The suggestion was seized upon by the crowd and agreed upon by Garcia and Cruz. Each man was to use his own horse and any type of lariat he wanted.

Garcia who was an expert in brush-roping decided to use a small loop. He dalled his rope around the horn of his saddle—which was a customary trick in brush-roping to permit the rider to throw off the dally in case of trouble.

Cruz decided to use a large loop and kept his lariat tied to his saddle horn.

The entire town turned out to witness

the duel. While the crowd made side bets, Garcia and Cruz examined each other's horse and lariat.

Like the knights of old they mounted their horses a few hundred feet apart and then charged at each other.

Cruz, with the longer lariat, sent his large loop sailing through the air in a perfect throw for Garcia's body. Garcia bent low over his saddle, flicking his own small loop upward and knocking Cruz's lariat harmlessly to the ground.

Garcia then wheeled his horse and threw his own small loop around Cruz's shoulders. Garcia paced his horse so as not to jerk Cruz from the saddle and held his short lariat taut, watching Cruz fight to free himself from the small loop while the crowd roared with derision.

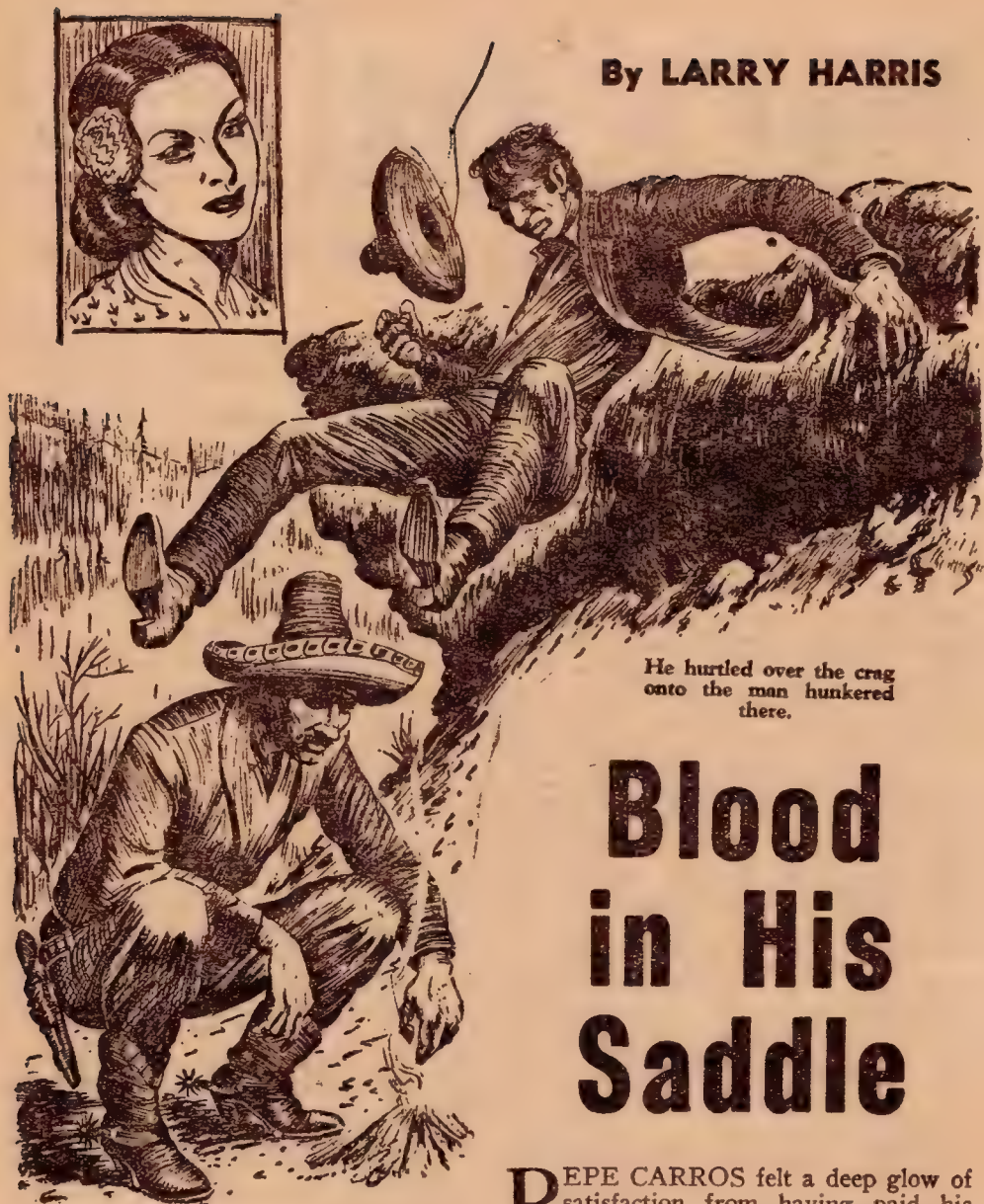
Cruz finally freed himself and formed another large loop with his lariat. Again the men charged at each other. Again Garcia flicked Cruz's large loop with his short lariat knocking it harmlessly to the ground. Garcia then snaked his own small loop around Cruz's neck.

Cruz's galloping horse picked up the slack in Garcia's lariat. Just before the rope went taut, Garcia tried to throw off his dally but it would not come off the horn of his saddle. The lariat stiffened as Cruz was jerked from his saddle to the ground. His neck had been broken and he was dead.

The crowd gathered around Garcia who pointed at the horn of his saddle with a puzzled expression on his face. Instead of the usual dally which could be thrown off easily, the lariat was tied to the horn.

Juan de la Cruz had tied Garcia's lariat to the horn of the saddle before the duel began in an effort to handicap his opponent. Instead, Cruz's own hands had tied the knot which cost him his life.

By LARRY HARRIS



He hurtled over the crag
onto the man hunkered
there.

Blood in His Saddle

The dusty little cowtown of San Gabriel will not quickly forget tough Pepe Carros—an hombre who paid a prison-debt he did not owe, and then came back, ready to lay down his life for men who scorned to look him in the eye! . . .

PEPE CARROS felt a deep glow of satisfaction from having paid his debt to society. Even though the *Yanqui* court had made a mistake in convicting Pepe, he had paid the debt without a whimper. Now it would be Pepe's obligation to collect his dues from the *ladron* who had made him the scapegoat.

The long dark nights in his cell had burdened Pepe with ugly memories. The back-breaking toil in the beet fields, under the scorching Texas sun, had all but clabbered his brain. But Pepe had denied himself the hate he saw in other prisoners;

he had accepted Fate with stoical calm, for the good padre in San Gabriel had, long ago, instilled in Pepe a feeling of the futility of man's rebellion against his destiny.

In the two years at Huntsville, Pepe had found solace in the prison padre's teachings. He had learned that Texas was but one state among forty-eight in the great *Estados Unidos*; and there were no *revoluciones*, and a man with many leagues of land had but one vote to cast for the *presidente*, and his vote was no better than the *mestizo* who cleaned his stables.

He had learned that *Los Estados Unidos* was a nation of many peoples, of different races and creeds, whose principles were against bondage.

It was all a little puzzling to Pepe Carros, but he felt proud of this learning. It made him glad that he was a citizen, able soon to enjoy this freedom, shared alike by all races, creeds and colors. It helped allay the hurt inside him when he thought of the frightful mistake the *Yanqui* courts had made.

THUS that bright spring morning, Pepe Carros stood proudly before the prison warden and heard the reading of his official release. He stood there in his cheap new suit of clothes, his hat in hand, a small-statured, brown-skinned little man with intent black eyes. Somehow he looked older than his twenty-six years.

"My hope is, Pepe Carros," the warden concluded, "that you become a useful citizen, bearing malice toward none. You understand, Pepe?"

"*Si, Señor.*"

"You were sentenced for stealing a saddle, weren't you, Pepe?"

Pepe nodded, then protested. "But it was a mistake, señor. Some day I will prove it to be a mistake. I did not—"

"That will be all, Pepe," said the warden quietly.

Pepe was ushered out of the office by one of the guards. He walked out past the front gates, smiling at one of the men in uniform there and saying, "I am free now."

"You'd better get going," the guard muttered.

Pepe walked along the dusty road,

watching his shadow upon the ground and thinking what a shame it was to get his new boots soiled. That night, deep in the live-oak hills, he found shelter, warmth and food in the shack of a lonely goat-herder.

The bearded *viejo*, owner of the goats, welcomed his visitor and cooked a bountiful meal of frijoles and tasty kid. When, at dawn, Pepe prepared to depart, his host fetched one of his burros from the corral.

"He is aged," said the old Mexican, "but with proper care he will take you to your home in the Big Bend."

"A million thanks for your kindness," said Pepe.

"We Mexicans must stand together," said the herder of goats.

After that, Pepe Carros rode with unhurried certainty toward the hazy peaks to the westward. There were times when the lightness of his heart dictated songs, and his thoughts turned to Medina, full of breast and light of limb, whose bright eyes would glow with happiness at his return. Her crippled *tio* might even smile. There would be the many cousins to celebrate his homecoming. Red wine would flow freely, there in Alkali Flats, outside San Gabriel.

Pepe did not feel hunger, for in many settlements he found hospitality among his people. Then he found the forests and scattered settlements behind him. He carried water in a pig bladder, rationing it out cautiously to himself and the burro after he crossed Devil's River. The sun-baked desert, sparse with mesquite and greasewood, shimmering in the blinding heat, stretched out interminably before him.

For days Pepe kept peering at the distant, jumbled peaks, and he knew that beyond them was San Gabriel. Sweat crawled down his face and stung his eyes. His suit was no longer bright and new, and his boots were scuffed. But Medina, he thought, would not notice his boots and clothes. Much of the time he walked, giving rest to the burro, and he did not sing now, for he needed his strength.

He lost track of time and distance. There were times when it was difficult to determine his dreams from reality. Hunger gnawed deeply into his belly. His

head throbbed and sleep tugged at his eyes. Every fibre of his being fairly screamed at him to rest, but he went on, knowing that if he were to sleep now there would be no awakening.

In a high mountain pass he found a spring among some gnarled cottonwoods. While his burro drank, Pepe buried his face in the cool flow, drinking sparingly, making sobbing little sounds of joy. Later he chewed on unripened mesquite beans, savoring the nutritious juice.

NEXT evening, leading his burro, he trudged down out of the barren hills into the broad, brush-dotted basin that was his home. Yonder, miles to the south, the Rio Grande wound torturously through Santa Helena Canyon. At the toe of the distant hills stood the cowtown of San Gabriel in the brush—sun-baked 'dobe and clapboard buildings, a single main street, its four hundred or so people.

East of town the sheet-iron shacks and 'dobe *barracas*, the ramshackle goat corrals and dilapidated feed sheds lay in ugly disarray amidst the willowy salt cedar. Here, off to themselves, the Mexicans had their settlement, for the white-crustured alkali soil was worthless to the surrounding ranchers. The goats survived upon the tufted salt grass. Hand-dug wells were shallow, the water was bitter. When the summer rains came the entire settlement was usually flooded.

Pepe had exercised great caution when he built his 'dobe *jacal* on a cutbank next to the sandhills. Flood waters were not a menace. He had covered the roof with maguey leaves, fitting them carefully against leaks, and built furniture to suit his needs.

From the river he hauled blue clay, plastering the naked 'dobe. He labored in the broiling sun, neglecting his shaggy goats. When the job was done to his complete satisfaction he had waited until the light of the moon to ask *Tio Chagra* for Medina's hand.

All his life Pepe would remember that night of proposal. Medina was wearing a rose in her hair, one she raised in a tin can outside her window. She'd tried to hide the hurt of her feet encased in the new *sapatas*, a gift from a cousin across

the Rio. She smelled of soap and water, and her red cotton *rebozo* was fresh with newness. Her dark eyes fairly danced that night when she met Pepe at the door of her uncle's *jacal*.

"Welcome, Pepe," she had said demurely.

His heart beat wildly as he felt the throbbing warmth of her handclasp. All the solicitous words he had memorized to say to Medina's uncle froze in his throat as he handed the head of the house a peace offering—a bottle of red wine. Pepe's mumbled words fell flat, and the scowl on *Tio Chagra*'s deep-lined face was frightening.

Tio Chagra drank the wine in dark silence, and the mellowness Pepe had hoped for was not forthcoming. In the candlelight *Tio Chagra* sat in his crude armchair, looking first at his partially paralyzed legs, sipping from the bottle, then staring distrustfully at Pepe.

At last Pepe caught a sly nod from Medina, and he steeled himself for the ordeal. He felt a clammy cold lump where his heart should have been.

"I have love for Medina," he said. "I promise to make her a good husband, *Tio Chagra*. The time has come when I must ask you for her hand in marriage. I—"

"Enough of your foolish babble, Pepe—you strutting young rooster!" *Tio Chagra* blurted angrily. "You have nothing to offer my *chiquita* but a house of mud and a handful of bleating goats. She is too young to know her own heart. She has been carried away by your ambitious talk and your boyish smile."

"But, *Tio Chagra*, I love Medina!" Pepe persisted.

"Bah!" snorted the viejo. "You speak of love with the wagging tongue of a thirsting burro. Love is not for you and Medina. She has *hacendado* blood in her veins. When the time comes she will wed one of her own equal, like—"

"Like who?" Pepe demanded. "Who is there in Alkali Flats who has such blood?"

"Luz Trueba is such a man," *Tio Chagra* said firmly. "Months ago he asked for Medina's hand, and I consented. Luz Trueba has the blood of Old Spain in his veins. He is a man of vision who, some day, will have much wealth. Mis-

fortune in matters of money was the only reason he settled in Alkali Flats months ago. But his shrewdness in matters of business will account for him being wealthy soon. Then he can give Medina the finery she deserves. He can buy a rancho and give me the luxuries a man of my years is entitled to."

"Luz Trueba," Pepe said heatedly, "has the split tongue of the viper. Never has he spoken the truth to anyone."

"A coward speaks behind a man's back!" *Tio Chagra* thundered.

"The same have I spoken to Luz Trueba's face," Pepe retorted. "Even your good friend, Ignacio the saddle-maker, will tell you that Luz Trueba is not the kind for Medina."

"I do not love him, dear *Tio*," Medina cried tearfully.

Tio Chagra's gnarled hands clutched the sides of his chair as wrath shook him. "Get out, you son of two dogs!" he shrilled at Pepe. "Get out, and take this empty bottle with you!"

AND Pepe had fled, the bottle barely missing his head. He had not forgotten that night, nor the nights later when he and Medina held their secret rendezvous. When she confided of Luz Trueba's frequent visits to *Tio Chagra's* house, Pepe's blood ran hot.

"I hate him, Pepe," Medina said tremulously. "His eyes are not good to behold when he looks at me. The touch of his hand is revolting. But you must be careful, Pepe. He might try to kill you."

Pepe, wishing no trouble, avoided Luz Trueba. But the meeting was bound to come. One night in San Gabriel Pepe was coming out of the General Merchandise store, where he had gone to purchase some meager supplies. And Luz Trueba, leaving the Red Front Saloon, spotted Pepe and confronted him.

Luz Trueba was in his early twenties, a thick-shouldered man with brawny arms and restless bloodshot eyes. He stood a foot taller than Pepe. He sported a rattler's skin for a hat band. His pants belt was brass-studded. His walk was a swagger, his smile a twisted sneer. Part of the time he lived in a shack at Alkali Flats, when not employed as a horse-wrangler

on one of the nearby San Gabriel ranches.

Because he was a cracker-jack bronc-peeler, Luz Trueba's services were in demand. He spoke English without a trace of accent. He gambled and drank heavily, knew when to hold his place among the *Yanqui* ranchers, and somehow had wormed his way into the good graces of the townspeople.

As he faced Pepe now, Luz Trueba spoke loud enough for everyone along the street to hear. "I don't appreciate you trying to take my girl away from me, Pepe," he said. "In my opinion, you're a damned goat-herding greaser."

Rage ripped through Pepe like streamers of red fire. He lost his head completely, flying at Luz Trueba with balled fists. And he took one of the worst beatings ever given a man on the street in San Gabriel. Blood-smeared, deathly sick and half-conscious, he got to his feet and staggered away. He looked back and said:

"There'll be a day of reckoning, Luz."

But that day never came for Pepe, and his humiliation was a galling sore over his heart. He saw no one for days after that, except at a distance. Then one day he was off in the brush pasturing his goats. The instant he came within sight of his house some psychic instinct warned him of further trouble.

Sheriff Bruce McAllister, two townsmen, Ignacio the saddle maker, and Luz Trueba were there at the shack, awaiting Pepe's return. Their saddled horses stood nearby. They looked queerly at Pepe as he came up; only Luz Trueba was grinning.

In his calm way, Sheriff McAllister said, "You didn't do a very good job of hiding the saddle, Pepe."

Pepe stared, feeling the first thrust of panic. "I do not understand," he managed.

Sheriff McAllister told him then of Ignacio's saddleshop being broken into last night. A silver-rigged, expensive saddle had disappeared. "We trailed you here, Pepe." He pointed to the new saddle close by, soiled and bent. "We just now dug it up where you had it buried in the corral. You'll have to go with me, Pepe. This is a serious offense."

Later it dawned on Pepe that he had been framed. He tried to tell the court

that he was innocent, but it was no use. He went to prison tortured with memories that time alone would have to erase.

"There will be a day of reckoning," he had told himself.

THE rancor was gone from Pepe as he rode up through the darkness to his house. There were only the memories and the scar on his heart. He slid off his burro, conscious of the desolate emptiness of the house, listening to the night sounds.

A pack rat scampered across the dirt floor as he stepped into the doorway. He smelled the dust and decay. Sadness stole over him, for he knew now that his homecoming would not be as he had anticipated.

Around him the night air was heavy with the smell of cooking beans and garlic. Candle light glowed dimly at the open windows of the scattered shacks in Alkali Flats.

Out of the gloom came the sound of a man's voice lifted in song, accompanied by a guitar. Corraled goats, adding to the smells, bleated mournfully. Mosquitoes buzzed through the dense salt cedar thickets. In the darkness the crusted white alkali lay upon the ground like a thin skiff of snow.

Pepe stabled and watered his burro. Then, without hope, he moved wearily across the flats, listening to the crunch of his boots, struggling against his growing apprehension. The lighted windows of *Tio Chagra's* house drew him.

Medina heard him coming and met him out near the well. In the starlight she appeared more beautiful than ever. She was breathless and a little frightened.

Pepe tried to quiet the turmoil in his breast. "I have come home, Medina," he said.

"I am glad, Pepe," she whispered, a choke in her voice.

He had meant to take her hands in his own, and speak of his love. Of lonely nights he had dreamed and prayed for this moment. But now that it had come he could say nothing. He was conscious of his trembling weakness. He perceived the change in Medina, and something seemed to wither and die inside him.

"I am glad," she repeated.

He forced himself to say, "You are not

married, Medina?" His voice was low.

"No, Pepe."

"Luz Trueba is still around?"

"Yes, Pepe."

"And *Tio Chagra* still holds dislike for me?"

"He still holds that I should marry Luz Trueba, Pepe—even though my heart breaks. I cannot change him. Each night I have prayed for God to intervene, but nothing happens. It is you I love, Pepe, even though you are called a saddle thief."

"I am innocent, Medina."

"I believe you!" she whispered fervently.

"Some day I will prove it, Medina."

They talked on, in whispers, as lovers will, and Pepe then felt the warmth, the trembling pressure, as her hands took his own. That cold, stifled feeling inside him seemed to thaw, and man's eternal hope filled him with giddy dreams.

Then thoughts of Luz Trueba suddenly crushed those dreams, for Pepe knew that peace and contentment were not for Medina and him so long as Luz Trueba was around.

"We shall meet here at every opportunity, Medina," he told her. "It is the only way. Something will happen to change things. I shall ask the good padre at *Guadalupe Mission* to pray for us."

PEPE returned to his house, and word of his return spread like wildfire the following day. Many of his old friends came to see him. Some of them brought nannies, heavy with kid, as gifts, knowing that Pepe would set out to rebuild his herd. These friends were cordial enough, but Pepe came to realize that they still believed him guilty of stealing the saddle two years ago.

One of the men, Sanchez the carpenter, smiled slyly and winked. "A buyer in *Chihuahua* would have paid you well for that saddle, Pepe," he chided.

Words of protest flooded to Pepe's lips, but he restrained them, feeling only shame and a deep hurt that even his friends believed him guilty of saddle thievery. Nothing, he thought, could change their opinion. Medina alone believed in his innocence. But he wanted everyone to know the truth. He wanted a good name; he hated the whispering behind his back.



Trueba would tell wild tales of Border renegades. . . .

It cut Pepe across the grain, to have to meet Medina in secrecy. Wild anger and fear plucked at his heart when he saw Luz Trueba courting her openly. When Medina told him that *Tio Chagra* had set the date of her betrothal to Luz Trueba, a thousand knives in Pepe's heart could not have hurt worse.

Word reached Pepe of Luz Trueba's drunken boastfulness in town. Luz seemed to have more money to spend than an ordinary horse-wrangler. He bought Medina an expensive *mantilla*. He kept *Tio Chagra* supplied with flattery and red wine. For days and nights at a time he would disappear. Then he would suddenly reappear at his shack in Alkali Flats.

Sometimes he would be surly and ill-tempered, and the neighbors would avoid him, for in such a mood they feared him. They still recalled the horrible beating he had given Pepe.

Other times Luz would be in a boastful mood. He would show the gaping *mestizos* huge rolls of money and tell of his plans to buy a cattle rancho for Medina and himself. He would tell wild tales of Border intrigue, of easy money for a man

of his brains. If Pepe's name was mentioned, he would scowl and say:

"Pepe is a frightened rabbit. Let him cross my path and I'll cut his heart out and feed it to his smelly goats."

Then the day that Sheriff McAllister and his posse rode up to Pepe's shack, it was with fear and apprehension that Pepe greeted them. In that posse were big Jim Mayberry and his son Bob, owners of the vast Lazy-M ranch. Both were large men, given to strong prejudices, violent likes and dislikes. They wore six-shooters at all times. When either of them spoke, other men had a way of listening.

With no spoken word Sheriff McAllister and the two Mayberrys got off their horses and entered Pepe's shack. They examined the packed dirt floor as if expecting part of it to be dug up. Pepe followed them as they looked over the corral and the nearby shed.

They were ready to leave when Sheriff McAllister finally spoke.

"The Mayberrys here have been plagued by night butchering, Pepe. Prize beeves have been killed and the meat carried away. We think it has been going

into Mexico, fetching a good price to the thief. You wouldn't be knowing anything about it, would you Pepe?"

Pepe swallowed hard, feeling the prickle of their suspicious stares. "No, señor, I would not do such a thing."

As the men remounted their horses, Sheriff McAllister said irritably, "Watch your step, Pepe."

They rode away, and the sun lost its brightness for Pepe. All the hopes and dreams he had clung to slipped away and he felt only the loneliness that comes with disgrace. He looked toward *Tio Chagra's* shack and saw Medina standing in the doorway. He wanted to run to her and reaffirm his innocence, but the strength and will were not in him.

WHEN darkness came Pepe pocketed the few remaining coins he had saved from the sale of four kids. He took a circuitous route around Alkali Flats, riding his burro through the salt cedar and brush until he came out on the single main street in San Gabriel.

He passed the outlying 'dobe homes of the townspeople, where lamplight brightened the curtained windows. He rode with the dull, tortured hopelessness of a little man who, long ago, had learned the futility of bucking destiny.

A drink, he thought, might relieve some of the ache in his heart. He had not entered the Red Front Saloon since his release from prison. It would be nice, listening to the small talk of the *Americanos*, smelling the sweetness of their *cigarros*, hearing their reckless laughter.

Pepe said no heed to the loiterers along the dark walks as he guided his burro up to the crowded hitch pole in front of the saloon. He slipped to the ground and pushed through the batwing doors.

The booted, gun-hung men who stood hunched over the bar turned, and their talk died. Among those men Pepe recognized big Jim and Bob Mayberry, flushed with drink. Pepe then saw his mistake in coming here. He felt the shock of unfriendliness, the crushing tide of prejudice.

He went ahead. There was nothing else to do. Alone at the end of the bar he laid down a coin, and his voice was weak but it carried the full length of the room.

"Please, I'd like a whiskey," he said in English.

The bartender slowly wiped his hands on his dirty apron. Anger spread over his fat face. "You're on my Injun list, Pepe," he said unpleasantly. "Get your thieving hide out of here."

Farther down the bar one of the men laughed. Another one swore thickly, and spurs chimed as young Bob Mayberry suddenly turned and came toward Pepe. The young rancher's eyes were feverish in his dark face.

"I'll tend to the thieving little greaser," he said hoarsely. "I've been wanting to do this a long time."

Pepe could find no defense against the powerful hands that grabbed him. He felt himself lifted into the air, and then came smashing pain as his body catapulted through the swinging doors.

On hands and knees he lit in the dusty street, beyond the walk. The breath was gone out of him. He made sobbing little sounds, tasting warm blood in his mouth, and his ears roared with strange sounds.

He was deathly sick when he finally pulled himself to his feet. That Luz Trueba was at his side, holding one arm and steadying him, meant little to Pepe. Luz guided him around the corner of a dark building, where they were alone, saying guardedly:

"Have you no honor, Pepe, no pride? A six-shooter bullet in the back of Bob Mayberry would square accounts. Have you not thought of that?"

"Leave me alone, Luz," Pepe said weakly. "I am sick."

He worked free of Luz Trueba's grip, walking off through the darkness of a vacant lot, forgetting his burro. And Luz watched him, his eyes glowing queerly. Then Luz entered the saloon and went up to where young Bob Mayberry stood with the other drinkers.

"As a friend I'm warning you, Señor Bob," he said sadly. "Pepe Carros is a Mexican like me, but there's bad blood in him. He's the kind that'll shoot a man in the back. I'd keep my eyes peeled."

PEPE walked out into the mesquite that grew at the rear of the stores. He lay down on a sandhill, staring up at the starlit heavens. After a long time, when

he was no longer sick, he got to his feet, circling to the rear of the buildings until he came to the back door of Ignacio's saddleshop.

Ignacio left his work bench, grumbling at the annoying knock of a late visitor. The sputtering, bracketed kerosene lamps upon the 'dobe walls shadowed his wrinkled face. His work was confining, and the hours long. His heavy shoulders were stooped from years of bending over his low bench. Beneath shaggy brows his eyes were tired from much bradding and sewing.

"Who is it?" he asked. "And what do you want?"

"It is I, Ignacio. Pepe Carros."

"You have the gall of one of your smelly goats, coming here, Pepe Carros!" Ignacio fumed in Spanish. "Enough trouble has come from our acquaintance. Be on your way, else I'll call the law. You sound *borracho*."

"I have not been drinking, Ignacio."

"Then be on your way."

"I must talk to you, Ignacio."

"A thousand curses upon you, worthless rabbit. No good could ever come of our talking. Besides, I have a job to finish."

"Please let me in, Ignacio."

The saddle-maker wiped his nose, making snorting noises, and then with great reluctance unlatched the back door. As Pepe came into the room, Ignacio scowled.

"The night you stole my saddle you did not knock, Pepe."

"I did not steal your saddle, Ignacio," Pepe protested.

Ignacio snorted his disbelief and returned to his bench. With wooden maul he went back to hand-tooling a fancy design on the skirt of a saddle. Pepe sat down on a box across from him, looking around disconsolately at the cramped, untidy quarters, smelling the tangy odors of fresh leather and glue.

"You are a disgrace to our race, Pepe," Ignacio said finally.

"Some day," Pepe said tiredly, "you and others will learn of my innocence."

"Death will overtake us all before that day."

"Perhaps not."

"We were friends once, Pepe. What

a shame that you had to ruin that friendship. Even I had hopes that some day old Chagra would accept you into the family."

"If God wills, that day will yet come, Ignacio."

Silence fell between them after that, and outside the town grew quiet, for the hour was late. Ignacio went ahead with his work, pounding and grimacing as he shaped the design. They heard riders gallop along the dark street once. Later, they heard excited, loud talk coming from the direction of the saloon.

"Something is wrong," Ignacio said, going to the front door.

Riders and men were milling in the street in front of the saloon. Their shouts and profanity told of men ruled by unbridled passions. Some of the crowd must have spotted Ignacio, for they came running toward his shop.

"Where is Pepe Carros, Ignacio?" a man shouted. "Have you seen him?"

Ignacio nodded nervously. "Why, yes, he's in here."

Sheriff McAllister led the angry mob through the door, shoving Ignacio to one side. There was suddenly a six-shooter in the lawman's hand. His square-jawed face was working with rage.

"You cowardly little murderer!" he said huskily. "Get to your feet!"

PEPE stared, unable to find the strength to move. As the sheriff advanced nearer, Pepe cried out shrilly, "I have done nothing, Sheriff. What is wrong? What has happened?"

There was the death-promise in the eyes of these men. Inside them were clamoring voices, and their hate was a poison virus, filling them with violence. Sheriff McAllister was the only one doing any clear thinking, for a mob is not able to think.

"Bob Mayberry was just murdered, Pepe," the lawman said harshly. "He was shot in the back a while ago as he and his father rode out of town. Bob threw you out of the saloon tonight. He was warned that you'd try to kill him. You killed him, Pepe. You might as well confess."

Strangely now, Pepe felt no terror. He said, "I did not kill him, Señor Sheriff.

Ignacio will tell you that I have been here with him for two hours or more."

Ignacio came forward, and heads turned toward him. These men knew that Ignacio, the saddle-maker, was a Mexican of integrity. He nodded, saying, "I have but little love for Pepe since he stole my saddle, but now I must defend him. He has been here with me for the better part of three hours."

Sheriff McAllister, holstering his six-shooter, said in Spanish, "I have never known you to lie, Ignacio."

"I do not speak untruths, Señor Sheriff."

"What'd he say, Sheriff?" one of the crowd muttered. "Make him talk English."

"It don't matter what language he speaks, boys," the lawman said heavily. "He says Pepe is innocent. You might as well all hit for home. We'll take up the killer's trail come daylight."

Long after they were gone, with Pepe and Ignacio alone, Pepe said, "I am in your debt, Ignacio."

The saddle-maker shrugged. "You had best sleep here with me, Pepe," he murmured. "The ways of a mob are fickle."

Pepe rolled and tossed on his pallet that night. At dawn he was up, searching for his burro, and finding the animal nibbling grass at the rear of the stores. He returned to the saddleshop and drank some of the coffee that Ignacio had prepared. When a customer entered the shop Pepe remained in the back room, listening to the man converse with Ignacio.

"Sheriff McAllister and his posse have trailed the killer into the high Chisos," the man said. "My guess is they'll nail him before sundown. Those men with McAllister ain't going to wait for no court trial. They'll hang whoever it is to the nearest cottonwood. Bob Mayberry had a lot of friends in these parts."

While they were still talking, Pepe slipped out the rear door. He hopped on his burro and gigged the animal into a run. East of town he guided his mount down the sandy incline into Alkali Flats. As he passed near some of the shacks, riding unduly fast, children paused with their play sticks to stare, and mongrels barked.

In front of Luz Trueba's *jacal*, Pepe

halted his burro. The plank door stood ajar, and the gloomy interior was deserted. "It is as I thought," Pepe said to himself.

He rode quickly off through the salt cedar, avoiding the other shacks as much as possible. Once in the high mesquite of the mesa he turned toward the towering mountains, north of town. The bright morning sun daubed the rocky battlements and rimrock a brilliant hue of pink. Through the chill, hazy air the spruce and cypress of the high slopes formed an erratic pattern, colorful as a Yaqui blanket.

IN THE rocky foothills Pepe found the ascent torturously slow. He dipped through storm-slashed canyons, dotted with yucca and Spanish dagger, letting the burro pick his tedious way to avoid the numbing sting of poisonous barbs. In the jackpine and scrub cedar he came upon a deer trail that mounted along precipitous ledges, overlooking the valley miles below.

The sun was high overhead when he finally came into the high timber. A white-tail deer bounded across his path, startling him.

Much of the time he led his burro, and in the altitude, his breath came in fast, tortured gasps. Deeper into the wild, tumbled land he wandered, ignoring the gnawing pangs of hunger.

And then he heard the crackle of underbrush, the click of shod hoofs against stones. He leaped to his feet, startled and frightened as Sheriff McAllister and several horsemen came out of the trees toward him.

"We spotted you when we topped the peak yonder, Pepe," the lawman said, drawing rein. "What are you doing up here?"

"I, too, am hunting the murderer of Señor Bob Mayberry," Pepe confessed. "I thought I might help."

One of the posse laughed without mirth. "Help," he sneered. "Sure, he'll help, Bruce. Them damned Mexicans stick together like fleas when trouble comes their way. They may hate one another, but they'll stick together. What you aim to do, Pepe, tip the killer off that we're on his trail?"

"No, señor, not that," said Pepe.

Sheriff McAllister smiled grimly. "You and your burro had best head back to town, Pepe. You haven't even got a gun."

They rode on away, losing themselves among the trees. When the sound of their horses had faded, Pepe remounted his burro. In the growing chill of dusk he was crossing a mountain meadow when, atop of a timbered ridge, he espied the furtive shadow of a lone rider.

A wild sense of elation filled Pepe, for he felt positive the rider had not seen him. With utmost caution he approached the ridge. The rider had vanished, but Pepe felt certain he could not have gone far. Among some boulders Pepe left his burro, creeping forward through the piñon bushes afoot. Part of the time he crawled, his breath tightly held lest a dislodged stone should warn of his presence.

Night shadows gloomed the hills as Pepe crawled to the brink of an overhanging rock. With hammering pulse he peered down at the man and horse, ten feet below. The horse stood with trailed reins. The man was on the ground, hunched over building a small fire. Around his waist was strapped a six-shooter.

Pepe crouched on the rim, poised, his brain afire with emotions. Then he jumped, yelling, the weight of his body sending the crouched man sprawling. And even as they rolled, Pepe snatched the larger man's six-shooter from its holster. He used it as a club, beating the barrel down against the cursing, fighting man's head.

"You stole that saddle, Luz Trueba," he cried. "You sent me to prison for something I did not do. You are a snake, Trueba, unfit to live with decent people."

NEXT morning, shortly after dawn, Sheriff McAllister heard the commotion in the street outside. Haggard and worn after a sleepless night, he went to the door of his office. A townsman was coming towards him, shouting excitedly and pointing.

Down the dusty street, trailed by barking dogs and a group of spectators, Pepe walked slowly, like a man in a stupor. His cheap blue suit was torn and dirty. His dark eyes, terribly bloodshot, glowed with a strange satisfaction. In one hand

he clutched the halter rope of his burro, and across the animal's back—arms and legs dangling—lay Luz Trueba.

"He is yet alive, Señor Sheriff," Pepe said quietly. "It is to bad that his horse got away. He will speak the truth now and confess that he, not I, stole Ignacio's saddle."

The confusion was all bewildering to Pepe after that. He kept thinking of Medina and the happiness that would fill her eyes when she learned that Pepe's name was free of guilt. And perhaps *Tio* Chagra, knowing the truth, would relent to marriage now.

When Ignacio touched his arm, Pepe turned. Ignacio's scowl was gone and his eyes were warm with friendship. "It calls for a drink, Pepe," he said. "Where are your ears? Did you not hear the bartender call to you?"

Inside the Red Front Saloon Pepe savored the taste of his drink. With a fullness of heart, he welcomed the friendliness accorded him by men whom he had barely known before. He knew this to be the freedom he had heard of, where men were judged by their deeds, not their race, color or creed.

When, later, Sheriff McAllister came in, he took Pepe's hand in his own, and the glow in his eyes was good to see.

"Luz Trueba has just talked, Pepe," he said. "He thought he could pin the blame for murder on you and get you out of the picture for good. Seems like there's a girl who hates him and loves you."

"That is Medina, señor," Pepe said simply.

"Trueba has been a trouble-maker around here for years, Pepe. He is the one who was butchering the stolen beef, then selling it in Mexico. He killed Bob Mayberry."

"I know," said Pepe. "But it was the saddle I kept thinking of."

"You're a good man, Pepe. We're glad you're part of San Gabriel."

Pepe could say no more, for there was a lump in his throat. At Alkali Flats he found Medina waiting for him. Medina in her red rebozo, her eyes brimming with tears of happiness. And in the doorway behind her, sitting in his chair, *Tio* Charga was smiling.

—Black Guns for

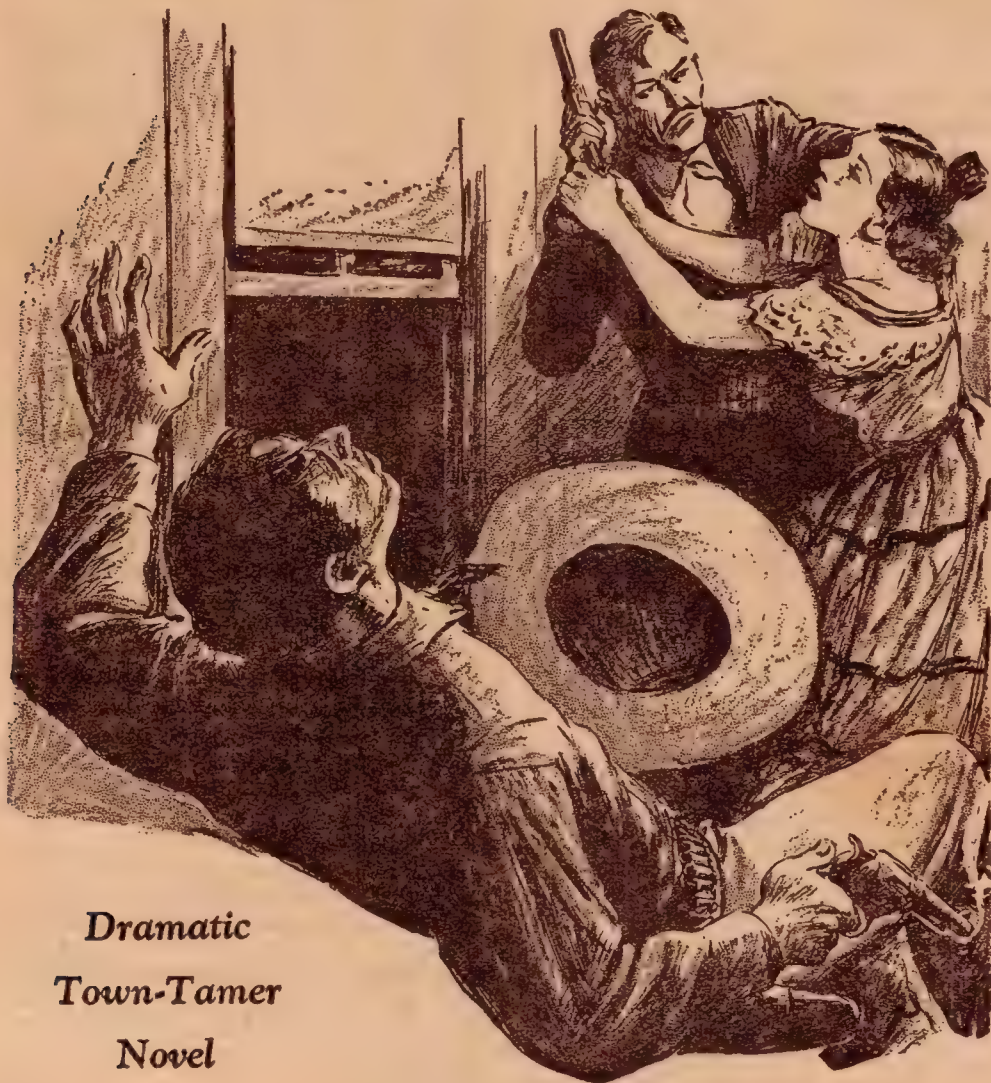
Chapter I

SIGN OF THE BUSHWHACK BREED

THE FREIGHT train from Amarillo pulled into Basin City about two o'clock that August afternoon and stopped to cut out a couple of stock cars. Sam Petty, the grizzled old depot master, went out to hand the conductor his train

orders. When he came shuffling back along the cinder apron, a man climbed down off an empty gondola and greeted him with a hard-mouthed grin.

Sam gave a start, then gasped. "Rance Donegan!"



*Dramatic
Town-Tamer
Novel*

Mourning

By
ROD PATTERSON

Donegan smashed him hard on the face and he went over backwards.



Rance Donegan, black-sheep saddle-tramp, figured he could cure Basin City of its bloody bushwhack blight with Doc Colt's hot lead poultice, aided by gun-toting medics and a hellcat nurse, who was too anxious to feed those pill-pushers their own deadly drugs! . . .

They shook hands under the hot, hard-hitting sun. "Sam," Donegan asked, his smile gone, "am I in time?"

The old man shook his head regretfully. "You're a day late. They buried him yest'd'y. And you better take care. They been watchin' all the westbound trains like they meant to make trouble."

Donegan's blue eyes hardened. "I got here quick as I could. It's a two-day ride from Burkburnett. Had to hop this rattler to save eight hours' wait at Red River Junction. Sam, what happened? Uncle Matt never wrote me he'd been sick."

"It was purty sudden," the agent admitted, an enigmatic expression on his deep-lined face. "And Rumson had him buried so quick you'd think it was small-pox!"

"Augie Stelsa wired me three days ago something was wrong. He didn't say what."

Sam glanced up and down the ramp, wary and uneasy. Then he said, "You're a-goin' to get a shock. Knowin' your knack for flyin' off the handle, I'd say it would of been better if you hadn't come at all."

Donegan's grin flickered. "It's my home town, Sam. And Matt was my only livin' relative. What's up?"

"Lash Vega's crowd took over the minute the fun'ral was over. Rumson's wearin' your uncle's badge, and half the stores closed up and barred their windows. They say Hank Luce and Bill Birdsall done left town till things are settled."

"Vega?" breathed Donegan. "That crook?"

"He's in the saddle now. The town's wide open," Sam told him. The bank shut down this mornin' right after word went 'round Rumson had freed all the outlaws in the jail. Son," the old man added in a harsh tone, "Your Uncle Matt was murdered by that Vega crowd!"

Donegan's face turned ugly and hard. "You don't have to tell me that," he said with a deep and corrosive bitterness.

"Rumson swore in a whole new set of constables. Augie Stelsa's the only square-shooter left on the force."

"Maybe," said Donegan, "I was wrong to holler murder when they killed that 'wet' Mex two years ago. If I'd kept my lip buttoned maybe I'd still be poundin'

that Mextown beat and might've stopped it."

"It's too late now," Sam said ominously. "The sheriff up at Acuno won't do nuthin'. Some say Vega paid him ten thousand to keep his hands off Basin City."

Donegan turned and picked up the yannigan bag he had tossed down off the gondola ahead of him. "Can I use your wash room, Sam? Got sand in my ears and gravel in my boots."

"Go ahead. Hope you got some in your gizzard, too, like the old days."

Donegan shut himself in the depot's wash room a moment later. When he finally emerged, he was shaven and scrubbed, his dark suit and hard-brimmed Western hat brushed clean of alkali and coal dust.

He was a wide-shouldered man, in his mid-thirties, lank-jawed, lean and competent-looking, with alert blue eyes that seemed to squint. For ten years he had served as a city constable under his uncle, Big Matt Donegan, but had been fired two years ago because of his reckless accusation concerning Bick Rumson, the deputy marshal.

"Much obliged," Donegan told the depot master with a grin. "If the shootin' starts outside, you better duck."

"I'm good at that," said Sam laconically. "Take care."

Donegan walked out into the sunlight, but he didn't get far from the station. Three men were waiting in the shadows beneath the nearest street arcade. A voice, harsh but soft, said, "Hey you!"

DONEGAN halted, seeing three men. The speaker was a tall, massive man with a jowled, ruddy face and opaque eyes—Bick Rumson. A nickel star glinted on his shirt above his bloated, bulging paunch. His eyes were stony, cold, hateful.

Donegan was curiously calm. "Amigos," he said blandly. "Saluciones!"

The two men with Rumson kept watching him. They were Chat Yacey, a constable, rail-thin, sallow-faced, big-hatted, and Doctor Herman Clagg, coroner, a thick-necked man with a cruel mouth and eyes that resembled the rounded ends of bullets in a revolver cylinder. He wore a

black suit and a gray vest with a bulge near his left armpit that indicated the presence of a shoulder holster.

Rumson was dressed in a soiled white duck suit, sweat-stained and wrinkled, a heavy cartridge belt visible under his sagging belly. Yacey wore dark trousers, no coat, a dark blue shirt and also sported a gunbelt and bone-butted .45.

"We been expectin' you," Rumson said with a grin that bared V-shaped upper teeth. "How 'bout comin' up to the courthouse for a talk? We don't want you to get any wrong ideas about anything."

"I got 'em already," Donegan said contemptuously.

"Your uncle had a bad heart," Doc Clagg broke in suavely. "I was treatin' him for angina."

"I got a picture of that," Donegan's lip curled. "Hell, Matt would've died on his legs before he'd let a varmint like you get within ten feet of him."

"He died in bed," Rumson said in that bland hard voice. "You orter be grateful, Donegan. We give him a fine fun'ral, with posies and—"

"Sixguns?" Donegan's voice jarred on the silence of the deserted street. "And pall-bearers that waited ten years to carry him in a box."

Doc Clagg's eyes narrowed. "Make any trouble, and we'll carry you off in one."

Rumson's belt showed the gleam of shells that could tear flesh and bone apart when fired at close range. They were heavy Magnum loads, not regulation .45.

"Don't stay in town too long," Rumson warned. "Over night 'd be about right. Then get out and stay out."

"I came back because it's my town," Donegan told him, his face set in stubborn lines. "And because Matt Donegan was like a father. Nobody tell me how long I can stay."

"It ain't your town any more," said Rumson. "It's nice and quiet and peaceful and I'll keep it that way."

"Quiet," Donegan jeered, "like a man with a knife on his throat."

"Who wired you Matt was dead?" Doc Clagg asked urbanely.

"You can find that out."

"We knew you'd come back lookin' for trouble," Rumson said. "I fired you out

of town two years ago, and your uncle tried to block it. He couldn't do it then, and he can't now. Because he's in Boot-hill. Use your head, fella, and shag it 'fore you run into a real jam."

"Heart trouble!" Donegan mocked. "Hell, Matt had muscles in his hair. You and Vega slipped up on that one."

He left them then—Rumson glaring ominously, Yacey uneasy, Doc Clagg saturnine and calm. Donegan headed up the main drag.

It was a long street, starting behind the railroad depot and running six blocks to the south, a wide sweep of hoof- and wheel-scarred red mud that had been dried to adobe by the blazing sun. There was a double row of wooden and adobe buildings, a few two stories high, with rigid wooden awnings supported by iron pillars.

The last block on the south side of town, toward which Donegan paced on his long, free-swinging legs, bordered on Mexicantown, a crazy jumble of narrow streets and alleys. In this area lay a dozen saloons and cantinas, as many dancehalls and gambling joints, a scattering of places that respectable people called "those other houses."

There were basement hideouts that held the "wetbacks"—Mexicans and Indians Lash Vega's men had smuggled over the international line at ten dollars a head and then shipped north to work illegally on farms and ranches that hired the *braceros*.

The deadline which Marshall Matt had set between Basin City's respectability and its region of evil lay at Main Street at a point dominated by the only three-storied structure in town: The Rio Grande Hotel. It was a wood frame building with a double-decker gallery and three entrances—two on Main, and one on a narrow side street named *El Calle Dos Bandidos*.

In this weathered hotel Matt Donegan had lived for twenty years, a bachelor, in a pair of rooms on the third floor that overlooked the town he loved and had ruled as its first and only peace officer.

THERE were a dozen wicker chairs on the lower gallery. In one of these, set back in the hot shadows, lounged a man with his big-brimmed hat pulled low over

his eyes, dozing out the siesta hour. Donegan recognized Constable August Stelsa from a distance as he swung up the sidewalk under the arcade awning.

When he had climbed the steps to the hotel gallery, Stelsa straightened and stretched, and said casually, "Hello, Rance. Been watchin' the reception committee hand you the keys to the burg." He rose to his feet, a hand outstretched.

"Nice boys," Donegan said with heavy irony.

"Yeah," Stelsa grinned. He was a man of medium height, sun-bronzed, sandy-haired, gray-eyed, his badge pinned loosely to his shirtfront, a gunbelt slung around narrow hips. "Nice boys."

Donegan clamped hard on Stelsa's muscular hand. "I got your wire, Augie. Thanks."

Stelsa's smile was gone as if a hand had wiped it off. His eyes turned grave. "I'm sorry in a way you came," he said in a low tone. "They'll make it hot for you."

Donegan waved it away, his mouth a tight line, his blue eyes glinting with suppressed anger. "Lash Vega's got a bear by the tail this time. Who killed Matt? You must know."

Stelsa made a quick gesture toward his lips. "Not so loud, amigo! I'm still on the force, don't forget."

It seemed a long time since Donegan and this bronzed man in the broad-brimmed hat had worked side by side on night patrol in Mexicantown's maze of crooked, dangerous streets. They had eaten together in the same chili joints, had drunk beer and tequila at the same cantinas. In fact, they had courted the same girl—pretty Rita Chavez, who had worked as a clerk in Luce & Birdsall's Mercantile a block from the depot.

Donegan and Stelsa had a mutual admiration for the gray-haired Matt Donegan who was their chief. They had grown up together in Basin City and started as constables on the same day, ten years ago. Now they faced each other on the gallery of the hotel, their friendship apparently cemented by the tragedy which had befallen their old boss.

"Augie," Donegan said in a soft but savage voice, "I don't give a damn about that cheap boot-licker Runson—or even

Vega—if he didn't have a hand in Matt's killin'. All I want is the man that did it, and I'll get him if I have to tear this burg apart with my bare hands."

Stelsa was silent for a moment, his face revealing inner agitation. "Son," he murmured, "you can't be sure he was killed. Doc Clagg performed the autopsy and—"

"Autopsy!" Donegan's mouth went flat and ugly.

"Rumson's orders. I don't know much, Rance," Stelsa said. "Maybe he did die of a heart attack."

Donegan kept looking at his friend, studying him, assessing him. "Augie, you've changed. You wouldn't be wearin' that star with Vega and Rumson in the saddle if you hadn't changed."

Stelsa's eyes steadied on the other man's face. "I got to eat," he said defiantly.

"Where you hangin' your hat?" Donegan asked in a relenting tone.

"Down in Mexatown. Last house on Mission Street. I bought it a year ago, for Rita . . ." He saw Donegan's startled look and added, lamely, "Hell, I asked her to marry me but she wouldn't have me!"

Donegan was silent, quite suddenly, and then he said, "What's happened to Rita? I wrote letters but she never answered."

"You ain't goin' to like this either. She's workin' for Vega. She's Vega's girl."

Donegan started, then his jaw knotted. His hand reached out and became a fist with Stelsa's coat twisted up inside it. "Augie, you're lyin'! She wouldn't do it. Rita's a good girl."

Stelsa shrugged, a hardness in his gaze. "I ain't said she was bad. She needed money. Doc Clagg was treatin' her mother for something that needed an operation. Big money. She couldn't get it at Luce and Birdsall's."

His expression softened as Donegan's grip on his coat relaxed and fell away. "I wanted to lend it to her, but she wouldn't take it. She's changed, Rance. Plenty."

Donegan picked up his bag. "I'm gettin' a room here. Come on in and we'll thresh this out."

Stelsa shook his big-hatted head. "Vega owns the hotel. The deal went through

three days ago—the day Matt died. No rooms for the public—only Vega's customers. It's a gamblin' layout. Roulette, Red Dog, Hazard—the works. Rita's his hostess.

Donegan's eyes were opaque, expressionless. He stared at Stelsa for a moment, then turned toward the lobby door. "I'll get a room," he said, "and don't you think I won't."

The constable started to protest. But Donegan had moved through the doorway and was approaching the desk at the foot of the staircase leading up to the second and third floors. Stelsa started to follow him, then glanced uneasily toward the street. He went back and sprawled his lank body in the wicker chair he had left a few moments before.

Chapter II

HIGH DEADFALL

THERE was no clerk on duty at the lobby desk. Donegan looked around the dim place, then latched his fingers on the handle of his bag and started up the stairs. They creaked under his weight.

Halfway to the second floor, he saw a movement on the landing above him. Rising into the hallway, he was confronted by a fat Mexican woman who held a pail and a mop and was blocking his way, belligerence on her stolid, swarthy face.

"No room, señor," she told him in a harsh voice that sounded like a man's. "You try somewhere else. Thees private now."

Donegan stood on the landing. "Tell Rita Chavez Donegan's here, pronto." His tone was curt, cold, impatient. "Andale!"

The woman never budged. "No," she told him determinedly. "Vamose, señor!"

There was a quick step behind her in the dim hallway. Donegan saw the girl at the same moment and heard Rita's soft voice say, "All right, Maria."

The Mexican woman pulled back and went lumbering past Donegan down the stairs, which swayed beneath her tremendous weight. Donegan faced the girl in shadows, slit-eyed, hard-mouthed. He'd have known her anywhere, in any crowd, in any town, a tall, strong-shouldered girl

in her late twenties, dark-eyed, black-haired, with a proud lift to her fine-shaped head.

There had been a time, back before he had angrily left Basin City, when Rita Chavez had meant more to him than any person in the world. And he knew she had felt the same about him.

She was beautiful now in a sultry way, her eyes luminously fixed upon him, her skin holding a vital glow even here in the shadows of the hall. Her father had been a Mexican *ranchero* in Chihuahua, her mother American, but here on the border there was no such word as "half-breed." And Rita had inherited the best characteristics of both her parents.

And now Donegan looked at her steadily, at the girl who had unbelievably become Lash Vega's woman. A pang of fury hit him and cold bitterness showed on his face and in his eyes.

He kept looking at her as she held out a hand to him and said, "Rance, how are you?"

He heard the careful greeting and felt the quick hand-clasp and memories flooded him that were hot and compelling.

He said, flatly: "Rita, I had you figured wrong. When Augie told me you were here, I called him a liar."

She was very still before him, very calm. "Is that what you wanted to tell me?" she finally asked.

"I want a room," he said. "My uncle's quarters, if you can fix it."

"I can't," she murmured. "Lash has torn down the walls. It's all one room now—for the games."

"Any room'll do," he growled.

"Rance, I don't—"

"I'm tired," he said harshly. "Been ridin' a rattler the last ten hours. I won't be, though," he added, "when I find the man who killed Matt Donegan."

Her face was in shadow and he couldn't read her expression, but he saw the way her body stiffened at his words. "Rance, you shouldn't say that. Unless—"

"How about the room?" he demanded.

"I don't know, Rance."

He said with a sardonical brittleness, "It's still a hotel, even if a dirty little rat does run it as a gamblin' dive!"

"There's a room on the side gallery," Rita murmured, turning as she spoke.

"I'll show you." She faced him again, pleading in her tone. "Please don't make trouble, Rance. Lash comes here every day and he might—"

"Don't worry about me makin' trouble," he told her, following as she turned again and led the way down the corridor. "I won't start anything till I get something to go on. Then, when I get it, I'll move fast."

IT WAS a small corner room, overlooking the side end of the upper gallery and an alley with a view across the flat roofs of Mexicantown. From it he commanded a view of the mesquite trees and cactus, the narrow, winding Rio Grande three or four miles to the south, the entire sweep of desert shimmering in the August heat.

Donegan noticed that a new flight of stairs had been built from the ground in the alley to the end of the second-floor gallery, a semi-secret means of entering and leaving the building for Vega's respectable patrons. Donegan's lip curled at the thought of who of the town's leading citizens would use that stairway.

The room was clean, its furniture adequate though uncomfortable—the iron-posted bed, two straight chairs, a washstand, a bureau and a cracked mirror over it. Donegan stripped off his coat and threw it with his yannigan bag on the bed.

Rita still stood in the open door, her dark eyes steady upon him, startlingly pretty in the hot light streaming in through the room's single window.

Impulse made him say, "Come in and shut the door. I want to talk."

She obeyed slowly, hesitantly, steadily watching him where he stood, a quiet bone-lean man with a grimness around his eyes and mouth. "I—can't stay," she murmured, the door closed, her back to it.

He walked toward her. "Who murdered him, Rita? Rumson? Yacey? Clagg?"

"Don't ask me that, Rance." She turned white to the lips. She waited a moment, then blurted out, "I loved him. He was a good man, but even if I knew he'd been killed I wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't tell me?" His tone was a whiplash.

Before he could say anything else, she cried, "You're stubborn, wild, when you're angry. If I told you what I think, you'd rush out and be killed. That's what they want. They'd shoot you down."

His laugh was a harsh rasping in his throat. He stood before her, very close, his blue eyes narrowed, his mouth a wire-thin line.

"Lash Vega's woman!" It was an insult the way he said it. The next instant she slapped him across the mouth. He did not flinch or step back. He felt the sting of her fingers on his lips. His grin came long and tough and merciless.

Her cheeks flamed. Her black eyes held glints of light-like sparks. Her lips were parted a little. Her right hand went down and gripped the door knob. He did not speak but put his own hand against the door and stood still, looking down at her, a grimace that was not wholly a smile on his ugly face.

She met his gaze unwaveringly, her mouth compressing. Her hand came up again, slowly this time, as if to stop him or push him back. He laughed cut loud, savagely, scornfully.

He knew her hand held strength, but not enough. He moved closer and felt her hand on his chest—felt it give under the force of his body. He put both arms around her and pulled her hard against him. Her head fell back on his arm and he kissed her. It was hard, crushing, brutal.

She did not strike him again. Instead she whirled, jerked open the door and left. He stood a long time, staring into the hall, his face a mask.

Then he shut the door, turned the key and went over to the bed. He removed his coat and bag from the blanket, transferring them to the chair. He opened the bag and lifted out his gunbelt and gun, tossing both over the back of the chair. They he pulled off his dusty boots and dropped full length on the bed.

They had warned him—everyone he had talked to since he had dropped off the freight an hour ago. And he was convinced that his enemies in the town would lose no time. A showdown was imminent. Of that he was sure. And he was ready for it.

With his hands locked behind his head

on the pillow, he slipped into a doze. A stealthy sound awakened him. His muscles levered him up and off the bed even before his eyes were fully opened. It was dark in the room, with only the faint glimmer of reflected light from the street revealing the outline of the window. He had slept for hours, exhausted.

A PIANO jangled tinnily somewhere in Mexicantown. The clamor of voices was faint and faraway. But these were not the sounds which had awakened him. He stood in the middle of the room, tense, sweating, alert. Then the scream came again. It came from the floor above, toward the front of the hotel.

Donegan sprang to the chair, snatched his gun from its holster, then jumped for the door. He was out in the dim-lit hall, running in his sock-feet, silent, swift, the gun cocked in his right hand. He found the stairway leading upward into darkness, climbed it, three steps at a time.

Groping in the upper hall, he saw the slit of yellow light down close to the floor. The scream came again, fear-packed, anguished, shrill. The door was locked, but Rita's voice was something that drove him to recklessness.

He hit the door with his left shoulder, heard it, felt it, crack. He backed off and lunged again. The door exploded inward, its lock shattered. He entered the room at the end of a staggering rush and found himself covered by two guns—one in the hands of Constable Yacey, the other in the swarthy fist of Lash Vega.

Blinking in sudden lamplight, he saw he was whipsawed. Yacey stood on his left, motionless, staring, dangerously on edge. Vega stood on the right, a small dark man dressed in black, with a crooked, bony face and little ratty bead-like eyes. The gun he held was toy-like in appearance, but lethal as the bite of a rattle snake.

Donegan's eyes widened and he saw Rita Chavez standing between Vega and an open window where the curtains fluttered in the breeze. This was a large room, and Donegan instantly saw that it was the one his uncle had occupied. A partition had been knocked out, and it was full of green baize gaming tables.

"Drop that cutter, Donegan," Vega

said in a quick, rustling voice that rose and fell like the whirl of a diamond back's rattles.

Donegan loosened his fingers and the big gun fell to the floor with the sound of a crowbar. He stared at the girl whose face was the stark fixity of a mask. "Nice goin', Rita." His mouth had a whiplash curl. "That screech sounded like the real thing."

The girl opened her mouth but no sound came. She was white with terror.

Vega's bleak, black eyes held on Donegan with a snake's unblinking stare. "Rumson said you was tough," he whispered. "Tough and dumb. I told Yacey you'd break down the door if you found it locked." His gaze slid to the girl and back to Donegan. "I'm afraid your girl friend's got to die with you," he said, thin lips barely moving on the words. "I just found out she's been playin' me for a sucker."

"Rance!" Rita spoke at last, the words rushing. "They tried to throw me out of that window."

"Shut up," Vega snarled. And to Donegan: "Fella, you'll never walk out of this place alive."

Donegan let his arms hang slack. His face showed no trace of emotion, no feeling. Out of the edge of his eyes he saw Chat Yacey coming around behind him, that heavy revolver rigidly pointing toward his back.

"So," Donegan murmured, "this is the way you killed the marshal?"

"Not quite," said Vega, the little gun in his hand jumping a bit. His colorless lips drew back in a vicious grin. "He never knew what hit him. A good way to die. Augie just walked in while he was asleep and—"

"You're a liar," barked Donegan.

Vega's sneer spread up one side of his swarthy face. "Augie was a friend of yours, but that was a long time ago. He needed money to buy a house and a lot of other things. Rita was one of 'em—till I told him to lay off. Augie's a good man. Maybe a little dumb, like you." His eyes flicked and he yelped, "Chat, watch him!"

But Donegan had not moved. His blue eyes had never left the gambler's face and the hate was still in the eyes.

He heard Yacey coming slowly up behind him.

Make him come closer, he thought. Just let him try to put that gun in the small of my back.

He said to Vega, "You can't sell me that one about Augie. When I get my hands around that skinny windpipe—"

Behind him, Yacey inched close. He felt the round, silver circle of the gun muzzle against his back, just above his waist. Now, he thought. *Now!*

Then came Vega's scream of warning. But it was too late to save Yacey. Donegan's hard left hand flashed behind him and struck the constable's wrist. Without moving his feet, he twisted at the hips and pulled his belly out of the line of fire.

Yacey's gun went off with a deafening crash. The bullet whanged into the floor. Donegan pivoted and his right fist jolted Yacey's jaw. The constable collapsed, his spine in a backward bend, his face tipped violently toward the ceiling. He struck on his neck and shoulders, knocked senseless.

RITA screamed. Donegan swung back, lunging toward Vega. The girl had both her hands locked on the gambler's gun arm and was straining to turn the pistol downward. It flashed a needle of flame. The bullet whiffed past Donegan's head.

Donegan reached for Vega, but the man flung the girl aside, dropping his pistol, and wheeled back against the wall. His mouth was twisted in the shape of a crooked letter O and his color was like damp putty.

Vega was a badly frightened man. He made the open window in three strides and dove through it without touching the frame or the sill.

Rita's shriek coincided with the impact of Vega's body on the second-floor gallery ten feet below. The girl buried her face in her hands, shuddering. Donegan went to the window and leaned out into the night, staring downward.

He saw Vega's body down there in the darkness, lying face down, the arms outstretched as if in supplication. He did not move, did not even breathe.

Donegan turned around. Rita was

watching his face as if fascinated by its strength and its ugliness. "Rance," she whispered, trembling.

He looked at her, his bitter eyes locking with her luminous ones. "How in time did you get mixed in this?" he asked in a quiet tone. "Just tell me that, and maybe I'll believe you."

She strove for composure. "My mother was sick," she finally said. "I had to have money for Doctor Clagg. An operation might have saved her. He offered me a job as hostess here. I took it and then—then my mother died. I couldn't quit. He threatened me."

"Do you think Augie Stelsa killed Matt?"

She made a grimace of revulsion. "No. How could he do a thing like that?"

"Who was the last man in this room while my uncle was alive?"

She stared at him a long moment, then said, "Augie." She followed that with an urgent: "It doesn't mean he did it, Rance. It just means that Vega knows it, and is trying to cover himself."

"It that's the truth—and I hope it is—I've still got something to settle with Augie," Donegan said grimly. "He could've told me he saw Uncle Matt just before . . ."

On the floor Chat Yacey was stirring and groaning. Donegan walked toward him, picked up the man's gun and tossed it on one of the green baize tables. He lifted his own weapon and set it on Yacey as the man sat up, dazed, glassy-eyed. Donegan snarled, "Clear out, Yacey. Out of the hotel! Out of town! If I see you again I'll kill you!"

The constable lurched to his feet, a hand clapped to his jaw which had a twisted, broken look. He staggered into the hall. His boots could presently be heard thudding unevenly down the stairs.

There was an interval in which there was no sound except the distant jangling of the piano somewhere in Mexicantown. Donegan looked at Rita, his mouth softening a bit.

"What I want you to do is this," he said. "Go to your room and stay there till I come after you. Tomorrow—"

He didn't finish, for they both heard voices in the lower hallway and afterward boots came clumping up the stairs.

"Stand back out of range," he hissed. "Here they come!" He motioned with the barrel of his revolver, and the girl shrank back in a corner. "If there's any shootin', get down on the floor."

The boots came along the hallway, then Bick Rumson's massive body filled the open door. Behind him came Doc Clagg, a small black satchel in his hand. Rumson stared around the room, saw the gun in Donegan's hand and snapped, "Where's Vega?"

"Out for some air," Donegan answered sourly, the gun bouncing with a glitter in his hand. "It got too hot for him in here."

"I said, where's Vega?" Rumson rapped out again.

"You heard me the first time." Donegan's grin was savage with pleasure at the big man's uneasiness. He nodded toward the open window. "He went out that way. It was quicker."

"My God," Doc Clagg ejaculated. "If he did, he's a goner."

"You better take that little black bag down on the second-floor gallery," Donegan advised. "If he's alive he's goin' to need a headache pill."

Rumson started to enter the room, started to walk to the window. But Donegan wagged his gun and said, "No, Bick. You'll take my word for it."

It might have been the look in Donegan's icy eyes. It might have been the big Colt double-action sixgun gently bouncing in his hand. Rumson didn't try any bluster or any threats. His giant frame filled the doorway with Doc Clagg's saturnine visage peering behind him. The double row of cartridges on Rumson's belt seemed to glint more brightly in the lamplight and that gleam matched the glint in his opaque eyes.

"If you killed Vega," he intoned, "hell won't hold you, Donegan."

Donegan laughed. Then Rumson wheeled and, with the coroner, vanished into the blackness of the hall. A moment later they could be heard hurrying down the stairs. Donegan whipped around to face the girl. "Get in your room." He jumped toward the door.

"Where are you going?" she cried.

"Never mind. But I've got to get out of this hotel before they surround it and

lock me in. You get in your room, fast!"

"They'll kill you!" she wailed, but he didn't wait to reassure her. He slid in his sock-feet down the stairs, ducked down the corridor and into his room. It took him but seconds to pull on his boots, strap on his gun belt and don his coat.

Then he was out of his window and going down the outside steps into the alley. In the street, he glanced upward and saw the small crowd of men on the upper gallery, heard their excited voices. They had found Lash Vega. Dead? Donegan fervently hoped so.

Chapter III

ALL DAMES ARE DOUBLE-CROSSERS!

THE unpaved, sandy streets of Mexicantown were crowded at the hour of eight. Lights from cantinas and dance-halls flared on the bright colors of the clothing the people wore—shawls and serapes of Mexicans and Indians. He shouldered into the crowd and no one paid him any heed. Pianos clanged and crashed in the depths of the saloons. Guitars sent out their rolling, plangent chords: Castanets clicked and voices lifted in short bursts of song.

He reached Mission Street, and walked into darkness. He found Augie Stelsa's small adobe house at the far end, its back yard part of the desert. The house was in darkness. He went to the front door and found it locked. He circled to the rear and climbed to the back porch. This door also was locked. But a window was open, and he climbed through it awkwardly, and was in the kitchen that smelled of tortillas and garlic.

He struck matches and groped his way into the front sitting room. There was a chair near a front window. He settled into it, prepared to wait, his gun out and resting in his lap.

The minutes passed without a sound. It was a quiet street. He waited an hour, then suddenly picked up the sound of a man coming up on the front porch. His fingers crawled around the black bone handle of his gun.

A key clattered in the lock. A soft step in the hallway followed the gentle shutting of the door. There was a vague move-

ment in front of Donegan. He said, very quietly, "Come in, Augie."

There was an almost imperceptible catch of breath, then Augie's bland voice said, "So? I wondered where you'd got to. I'm comin' in, son, and I got a gun in my hand."

"So have I," said Donegan. "And I can see you better. Put it down."

Augie hesitated, then Donegan heard the rub of metal against leather. Instantly afterward a match flared. By its flickering glow, both men looked at each other—Augie in the archway of the hall, Donegan seated with his big revolver steady in his hand.

The constable went to a table lamp, lifted the chimney and touched his match to the wick. Yellow light flowed over the room and its pink adobe walls.

"Why," Donegan said, "didn't you tell me you was the last man in Matt's rooms before he was murdered?"

Augie faced around, his gun in its holster, his lean hands resting on his cartridge belt. He sighed, "Because I knew if I told you that, I'd have to tell you who shot him in bed."

Donegan's eyes held a steely gleam. "Who did?"

Augie shrugged, and the sigh came again. "Bick Rumford. I met him on the stairs as I was headin' down."

"If you're tellin' me the truth . . ."

Donegan began. "It's the truth. So help me. I didn't tell you this afternoon because you had kill fever. If you'd gone after Rumson they'd of shot you down. He had men posted all over town, watchin' in case you came."

"Where've you been? I've waited an hour."

"Gettin' drunk. Or tryin' to, so I won't mind it when my best friend gets shot full of holes. They're out lookin' for you now."

Donegan rose to his feet. "I'll make it easy for 'em."

"Vega's dead," Augie told him flatly, harshly. "That dive he took busted his neck. Rance, you better hole up here till it blows over."

"It won't blow over, you know that." Donegan started into the hallway. "I'm gonn' after Rumson and that butcher,

Herman Clagg. And I'm gonna get 'em!"

Augie said, "You're goin' to get your head shot off."

Donegan backed into the hall, feeling for the door knob. His right hand was still weighted down by the sixgun. He moved into the deep sand of the street again. At the corner of Mexicantown's plaza where it met Mission Street, he pulled back in the shadows behind a yucca.

He waited a few minutes, half expecting to see Augie Stelsa's lean figure come out of the darkness. He did not appear. Relieved, Donegan mingled in the crowd and threaded his way back to the North Side.

HE DID not walk up Main, however, but turned down an alley and came out in the town's rear yards. He followed a fenceline and a broken row of sheds for three blocks, then cut back to the street. The court house and jail stood on his left, a squat mud-walled building with slot-like barred windows in the rear. Lights showed in two windows on the street side.

This part of town was in darkness. Stores were closed, their windows shuttered. Donegan's gun was back under his coat, in the holster that rubbed his thigh. He put his right palm on the black butt and moved toward the front door of the courthouse.

Voices came from the building, and Donegan rucked down the alley, waiting, watching, listening. In a moment three constables swung up the street. All three carried sawed-off shotguns cradled in their arms.

Donegan turned and went to the rear. He found the door that led into the jail's cell block and tried it. It was not locked. Entering, he moved through a narrow corridor lighted by a single lamp in a wall bracket overhead.

He came to another door. He stopped, head bent, listening, his face flat and grim and ugly in the black shadow of his hard-brimmed hat. Voices came from beyond the doorway. That was Bick Rumson talking.

"Doc, we made a mistake tellin' Donegan the old man died of a heart attack. We might've known he wouldn't swallow it. Now Vega's dead and we're left to handle him alone."

"You've got men enough posted to get him before he breaks loose and shoots up the town," Clagg's snapping voice retorted. "I don't see what you're worried about. The only mistake we made was not grabbin' him at the hotel when we had the chance."

"We've got to get the town quieted down," said Rumson in the same harsh tone, "and get the bank and the stores opened up before the sheriff moves in. And we got to get rid of Donegan in case the sheriff lands on us all of a sudden."

"I'll save you some trouble," Donegan said in a clear, loud tone, as he flung the door open and stepped quickly into the office.

The room was big and low-ceilinged, its three windows closed, the shades drawn down. Bick Rumson sat behind a huge flat desk with a green-shaded lamp on the wall behind him. Doc Clagg stood with a hand leaning on the desk, his black satchel on the floor at his feet, his hard eyes on Rumson.

"You should've plugged me when I got off that freight," Donegan added savagely.

And his mouth twisted crookedly.

Rumson rose slowly behind his desk, his beefy face completely blank. The coroner had not moved, except to turn his head part way toward Donegan. Rumson's right hand inched downward, gently brushing the skirt of his dirty white duck

coat. His lips moved but no sound came. "You can try," Donegan said, and pulled his gun.

Rumson drew at the same instant. Donegan shot first. The hard crash of the Colt rattled the windows, and the terrific impact of the bullet, hitting Rumson in the paunch, knocked the breath out of him in a short, bleating scream. He fell down behind his desk.

Doc Clagg recoiled against the wall, but Donegan swung the barrel of his gun around and his finger began its squeeze.

"Don't shoot," the coroner yelled in a hoarse shout of fear. His mouth jerked and loosened and his cheeks shook. Sweat beaded his forehead in small twinkling drops. He seemed to wilt, to cringe.

Donegan went around behind the desk, staring down at the man on the floor. Rumson was twitching, breathing in swift short gusts, the gasps of a dying man. His eyes were open but dulling over fast.

"I—didn't kill him." It was a whisper, a moan. "Doc did!"

Donegan swung toward Clagg, dropping his gun as he pivoted. He charged the coroner, both fists clenched and swinging. Clagg tried to get his shoulder gun, but Donegan was on him. Fists smashed Clagg's contorted face. He fell against the wall and slid to the floor, arms and elbows trying to protect his face.

Donegan fell on him. He had a glimpse



RED DEATH

Bronco Brownlee hoped the straight-shooting, red-hooded Roosters could help him bring law to the terror-held mining camps. But at the last showdown with De Spain's murderous renegades, Bronco stood alone—sided only by a one-legged sailor who had voyaged through Hell, and a two-fisted, bullet-torn lawman who wouldn't stay buried!

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of stained teeth bared in fear, and smelled the odor of a bad, animal breath. He drove his big knuckles into that twisted face, again and again, battering, pounding, slashing.

IT SEEMED that he was yelling and striking at everything, that the room was getting blurred before his eyes, that there was confusion behind him in the outside corridor.

Rough hands grabbed him from behind, trying to haul him off the coroner on the floor. He fought those hands, punching wildly at Clagg's bloody, battered face.

Then he was dragged bodily to his feet, panting, gasping, cursing. Three men wearing green uniforms and badges held him. He stopped struggling. Rita Chavez was in the room, and there were four more men in those green uniforms—the uniforms of the U. S. Border Patrol.

Rita faced Donegan. A grim-faced man came forward, saying, "You're Matt Donegan's nephew? I'm Captain Bliss." He held out a hand, thinly smiling.

Donegan gripped it, staring at the girl. She was white-faced, tight-lipped, but her eyes were bright. "Rance, are you—all right?"

Donegan swiped sweat out of his eyes. He looked around at Clagg who was leaning against the wall, his face buried in shaking hands. Doc raised his head and spat blood, then sat groaning, his chin on his chest.

"What's the Border Patrol doin' in town?" Donegan asked the captain. He was breathing a little easier now.

"Miss Chavez sent for us two hours ago," said Bliss, motioning his men to stand back from Donegan. "She's been working for the Patrol for the past couple of months—sort of undercover work. We knew Lash Vega and his crowd were smuggling wet Mexicans up north, but had to have proof before we could move against him.

"We found it tonight, down in Mexicantown. Vega was hiding fifty wetbacks in the basement of the Sol d'Oro Dancehall. We found another twenty under the hotel, locked up like animals. Quite a business Vega was doing. We just cor-

raled some of his men. Got a confession from one of 'em—man named Stelsa."

"Augie!" Donegan gasped.

Rita came over and put a hand on his arm. Her face was very grave, her dark eyes searching his blue ones steadily.

"I didn't dare tell you," she said. "Ever since you left town Augie's been working for Vega. When I told your uncle, Matt called him to his rooms and accused him. For a while I—thought Augie had shot him. But it was Clagg who fired the gun. Vega told me only yesterday. Until you came he trusted me—Vega did."

Captain Bliss broke in. "The sheriff'll be here within an hour with some deputies, but it looks, Donegan, like you've done most of the dirty work for him. And for me, too. You ought to be marshal of this burg."

"And he will be," Rita said emphatically, "if I've got any influence."

"You've got plenty," the captain said admiringly.

Donegan gripped Rita's shoulders with both of his big hands. He forgot the others in the room and stared at her, angry again, but in a different way. She met his gaze courageously.

"Why didn't you tell me all this before—tonight?" he demanded.

"Because you were too—too ready to start swinging at everyone and everything. Even at me! You thought the worst of me and—accused me of—that man, Vega!" She stopped, a break in her voice.

He held her shoulders firmly, the anger melting out of his eyes, an incredible grimace of sympathy on his homely face. "But why," he asked, "did Augie Stelsa wire me to come back?"

She met his gaze and said, "Because I told him I was in love with you. He wanted you back, wanted you put out of the way. He knew Vega would have you killed, and then maybe I would go with him."

Donegan slid his arm around her and led her toward the door. He glanced over his shoulder at Bliss and his men.

"Back in ten minutes," he grinned with a glint of his big white teeth. "Got some private business to finish that's been two years hangin' fire."

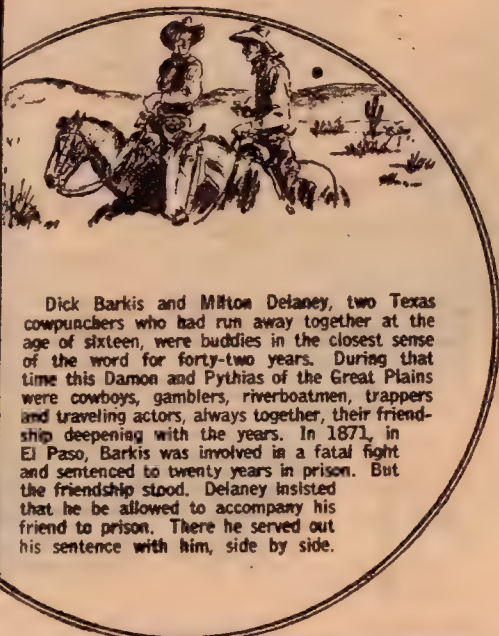
FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBBINS



Mrs. Jennie Scherer of Tucson was a devoted mother who felt very unhappy when her son Harold marched away to war in 1863. On the night that he left town, she lit an oil lamp, placed it in the window and vowed she would keep it burning until her son returned. It burned for fourteen years. Harold Scherer was given up for lost, his memory assigned to that drifting fringe of Civil War veterans who never could force themselves to return to their old home town. One day, a drunken stranger entered the house, asked for a drink of water, and accidentally knocked the lamp to the floor as he reeled about. The light went out. At the same time, Mrs. Scherer recognized the stranger's time-worn features. Her son was home.

Johnny Reiner, of Oklahoma City, was a professional collector. In the course of his long, busy life, he collected over \$35,000 for various organizations with such names as The Indigent Cattleman's Benevolent Society or The Territorial League for Peace and Whiskey. Most of the money—about \$34,000—went directly into his own pocket, but even those who had been hoodwinked admitted that he was a whiz at the game. Finally, however, a group of irritable dust farmers launched the first collection in twenty-five years in which Reiner did not take part—it was a collection for The Fund to Bury John Reiner. When they had collected enough, they hanged him.



Dick Barkis and Milton Delaney, two Texas cowpunchers who had run away together at the age of sixteen, were buddies in the closest sense of the word for forty-two years. During that time this Damon and Pythias of the Great Plains were cowboys, gamblers, riverboatmen, trappers and traveling actors, always together, their friendship deepening with the years. In 1871, in El Paso, Barkis was involved in a fatal fight and sentenced to twenty years in prison. But the friendship stood. Delaney insisted that he be allowed to accompany his friend to prison. There he served out his sentence with him, side by side.



Sam Bass, the famous highway robber, felt perfectly safe when he rode over into Parker County and settled himself into a house on the outskirts of Springtown. He was tired, still weak from a bullet wound, and only wanted to take a rest. One day, he decided to pay a call on one of his former outlaw pals, now supposed to be working as a bartender in Springtown. He stepped into the nearest doorway to ask directions. It was the doorway of the Farmer's Corn Bank. Bass thrust his face at the teller, who was shuffling a pile of banknotes. "I'm Sam Bass," he began. He got no farther. With a frightened squawk, the teller showed the money at him and fled into the street. Surprised, but rather pleased, Bass tucked the greenbacks into his pockets and rode away.





By
**VAN
CORT**

Manhunt in Boothill

He grabbed Paula Swinton about the throat and held her in front of him.



To track down the man who carried Ranger Carl Retton's signed bullet in his back, that tough Tejano must take as saddlemates a strange crew of living dead, and flush, from the limbo of forgotten killers, the deadliest quick-draw artist of them all—the Last of the Vanishing Legion! . . .

● Gripping Saga of a Grim Gun-Quest ●

Chapter I

HELLCAT OF THE BORDER COUNTRY

SHERIFF TAY GARNETT kept walking up and down in front of the fire, while Carl Retton watched from an armchair, his hand enclosed comfortably about a glass of bourbon and well water. Outside, the mountain night was still and soft, with only a faint whis-

per in the leaves to break the silence.

"You forget about Esparto," Tay was saying. "It's no use. Either he went back to Mexico and retired on his earnings or he got killed. You're like a stubborn hound dog who won't quit the trail. How long is it now—two years? A lot

can happen to a man in that time. You're not a ranger any more, so why fret about it?"

Carl blew a smoke ring and watched it vanish against the ceiling beams. "I'm not fretting. But that hombre and his outfit put a worm in my brain, and it's still nibbling there. I think that trail went north, not south. Sure, they did hear about him across the Border. Somebody claimed to have seen him, too. But a man with a gang like that don't vanish into thin air."

"That time he jumped our camp you sent a slug into his back," said Garnett, striding up and down. "Maybe that finished him off. Don't spend the rest of your days worrying about him. He's like California's Black Bart. That one vanished too. Nobody ever got him. Some of these hombres are smart enough to quit when they have enough. That's the real sign of a clever gambler."

Garnett measured the room again, and gave a dry chuckle. "The man who said that crime doesn't pay was a damned liar. There's more'n one respectable fortune founded between Texas and Montana on owlhoot money. But what the hell can you do about it?"

"I can remember," said Carl slowly.

A day after their brush with Esparto and his band, Carl and Tay and his small bunch of rangers had come upon a small hill ranch. The house had been set afire, but it hadn't burned. The kitchen stove was still hot, some stew simmering on it. Half the roof had burned, but a sudden mountain squall had doused the flames. Against a kitchen wall on the floor slumped the bodies of the scrub rancher, his wife, a young daughter, a ten-year-old boy. Mute, dead, bullet-ridden, blood still on their surprised lips.

There were bloody cloth strips and basins near one bed, as if someone wounded had been tended to by the women. There was coffee and food, broth, whiskey, the heel marks of many boots.

Carl remembered even his own words, "So they waited on him, tended his wound, gave him their best bed. And in the morning they lined them up against the wall. The fire might make it look like the work of Apaches."

He remembered the girl. Yellow braids,

large, surprised eyes. A mouth that had never been given a kiss. And he remembered that it was his own chance bullet that had stopped the bandit leader, and had made it necessary for him to stay overnight at this place. And he knew that he must somehow square things up for this murdered family, or he would never be able to forget.

Carl got up abruptly and drained his glass, sighed a heavy sigh. Then he began pacing up and down, and Tay Garnett sat watching him. At last Garnett said: "Stop tracking up and down like a trapped coyote, Carl. You make me nervous."

Carl did not answer. He had never got over the fact that Esparto and his band had gotten clean away. He had never abandoned the theory that the bandits were not Mexicans but Americans disguised in sombreros and black mustaches. For three years they had been the scourge of three states and then they had vanished. As a ranger, Carl had felt it a blot on his record that he had given up the trail.

Tay said again, "Sit down. I have a confession to make."

Carl turned and faced him.

"I didn't get you up here to fish for speckled trout," Tay continued. "I think Esparto went north too, not south across the Border. I found Roy Eldridge."

Carl's blood tingled, his pulses quickened. Roy Eldridge had been with them on that last expedition against Esparto. But Eldridge had vanished since, completely. He said, "You found him? Where is he?"

Tay Garnett hesitated, then spoke slowly: "You know the old saying, 'When you can't find a man, look to boothill.'"

"Yes?" said Carl sharply.

"Roy was sheriff here before me. You could have knocked me over with an empty sixgun when I found him in this out-of-the-way mountain district." He hesitated again and then said, "When you get to Carter, stop in at the cemetery. They put a very pretty marker on his grave. Yes, very pretty."

SILENCE hung heavily between them. "And Esparto?"

"It's a very faint chance, of course,"

said Garnett. "After all, no one ever got a close look at him. That's the damned part of it. He never had a record. There was no picture on the circulars—night rider exclusively. But you remember how sick Roy was that morning we found that little ranch family? You remember how he kept to himself all the rest of the day? Well, Carl. I don't think Roy ever intended to leave Esparto's trail."

"So why," said Carl, "should he hole in up here in this hick county, puttering around as sheriff?"

"Thank you," said Garnett with a wry grin. "But maybe that's it."

"You think you got anything to go on, up here?"

"I don't know. It's just a guess. There have been some robberies now and again. Somebody held up a gold shipment from the bank a short while ago. Once in a while somebody steals a ripe herd of prime beef ready for shipment, and whisks it across the mountains. A lot of pressure is being put on me right now by the town council to do something about it."

"And I'm stumped more or less, have nothing to go on. Luckily I got the backing and support of the head councilman, Dekker Swinton. He was the one who recommended me for the job in the first place. He's quite an hombre."

"So?" said Carl.

He noted Tay's expression then, and they were both listening against the night. From the distance came the muffled sound of hoofbeats. A nervousness suddenly took hold of Garnett. He got up and moved toward the door.

"Listen," he said. "Nobody knows you were coming here to visit me. No one saw you arrive. If you should run into anybody, my friends or anybody else, you're here on vacation, mainly to fish. Savvy?" There was an intensity in his voice which startled Carl.

"Yeah, that speckled trout," Carl said.

A moment later Tay was outside on the gallery, and Carl heard his voice. "Paula, this is a pleasure." He heard a woman's deep, throaty notes answering. There was a small easy laugh. Even before Carl saw the woman, the sound of her voice fascinated him.

She came into the lamp light then, and Tay said, "This is my old friend, Carl

Retton. Carl, I want you to meet Miss Paula Swinton." He cleared his throat then and added after a second, "My fiancée."

She was in her middle twenties, tall and firmly built without being at all big. There was a puma-like grace about her. As her brown eyes studied Carl with a measuring, interested look that stepped up his pulses a little against his will.

He was trying to get over the surprise as he took her hand. "You put one over on me, Tay. You're a lucky dog."

"That's me," said Tay with something that sounded like pride and embarrassment mixed. Carl glanced at his friend. Tay Garnett, tall, lean and hardfaced, could be said to be almost handsome—but not in a romantic way.

"I didn't know Tay had company," said Paula Swinton when they were all seated, sending her appraising but friendly glance over Carl.

"I didn't either, till he suddenly showed up," said Tay.

CARL lit a smoke and watched her through the blue clouds. She was definitely disturbing. She was the kind that men were attracted to at once. He said, "Tay dropped a hint about some speckled trout in a letter a while back." He indicated his spread-out tackle. "So I took a notion to come and have a try."

He saw Tay's glance on him that instance, and the girl said: "Speckled trout, Tay? I didn't know you caught speckled trout in the streams here."

Carl felt the awkwardness of the little silence before Tay got to his feet and said casually: "I'm going to make some coffee." He added lightly, "Maybe there are a lot of things you don't know about these woods and mountains. Sure, there's speckled trout up in the pools of Deep Stream beyond the Sioux Saddle. I got some fresh blueberry pie too." He went out into the kitchen and began puttering with pots and cups.

Paula Swinton sat watching Carl. Suddenly she said, "Funny, but I was born and bred here. My brother and I know all the fishing, but I never heard of any speckled trout."

"Maybe they came up here lately. That can happen, you know. Tay has been

holding out on you. He was saving them for me. I'm loco about fishing."

Her eyes were on his cigarette. "I could do with a smoke myself. If the sight of a woman smoking don't shock you too much. I caught the habit from the ranch hands." She winked at him. "Tay lets me smoke now and again when we are alone."

"That's all right. Would you roll me one?"

He got out tobacco and paper and made her a neat cigarette. When he was ready to close it he looked at her questioningly and she leaned forward to run her tongue over the edge as he held the smoke toward her. Her nearness affected him a little and he began to understand why Tay had fallen for her. At the same time she gave him again that sensation of the puma.

Her deep eyes rested in his as she quickly wet the paper and then took the cigarette from him as he closed it. She was like a cat in the branch of a tree reaching out a soft tentative paw. But he had the feeling that sharp claws were there somewhere.

Yes, he thought, he'd like to have her too, but not for long. No, not for long. Suddenly he did not envy Tay.

"You an old friend of Tay's? Known him for a long time?" she asked casually through her first puff of smoke.

Carl shrugged. "Off and on for a few years, I guess."

"I guess you were in the rangers together then."

He wanted to say no, but for some reason it would not sound natural. An instinct told him to deny it, but it was too late. He was caught off guard. "Yeah, for a while," he said.

She dropped the subject, but he had the impression that she had acquired information she was seeking. It made him uneasy. He was lighting a second smoke for her as Tay came into the room with a pie plate in one hand and a stack of cups in the other. He frowned momentarily as he saw her smoke, but forced the frown away.

"I see you've made friends quickly," he said in a tone that made Carl look up. Paula laughed. "I like your pal. Maybe you better watch out he doesn't cut in on your time."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," said Carl. "I came up here just to fish and loaf."

Tay Garnett said with a wry face, "You sure like to have your jokes, Paula."

She was suddenly laughing hugely, looking back and forth between the two of them. She blew a cloud of smoke at Tay. "Can't you take a little funning now and again?"

Carl Retton felt queer. He had never seen Tay like this. The whole scene seemed unreal to him. There was a wrong note here somewhere.

Over the coffee and pie they small-talked for a while. Afterwards Paula Swinton took over the chore of cleaning up the dishes and Tay followed her to the kitchen. Carl heard the two of them talking together in low tones.

He got up and stood turning the flyrod slowly in his hands, thoughts coming and going in his head. Tay Garnett engaged to a girl—that was something. He had always thought Tay a confirmed bachelor. Tay had a very dry and unsentimental attitude toward women.

When the two came back into the room Carl made a yawn and covered his mouth. "Sorry, I reckon I'll turn in. I'm tired of traveling."

Chapter II

RANGERS FISH WITH SIXGUNS

IT WAS midnight when he awoke in his room and heard a stir at the house rail. He heard Tay's deep voice: "You sure you don't want me to ride you home, Paula? I don't like this one little bit."

She laughed softly at him from horse back. "It's only two miles, Tay. I could ride this trail blindfolded. And I got my pistol in the saddle holster. Go to bed and get your sleep, Tay."

There was a murmur of voices and then the beats of her horse's hoofs in the distance. Carl lay listening to the soft wind in the trees outside. Moon shadows washed back and forth across the walls of his room. He wondered why Tay was living in this lonely comfortably ranch house miles out in the country, and not in town. It had all the earmarks of a rich man's hunting place, made of solid

beams, with an elaborate stone fireplace and good woodwork. There was only a small horse barn and corral attached.

"You sleepin'?"

It was Tay in the doorway. "No," said Carl. "Not exactly."

Tay's face was in darkness. "Well, what do you think of her? Ain't it your place to congratulate a man?"

Carl puzzled on this. "Sure enough. Very nice, Tay. A very attractive girl. You kind of caught me off guard there, that's all. I didn't know you were a marrying man."

Tay Garnett chuckled. "I didn't know it either, Carl, till I met the Swinton family. And her."

There seemed to be something on Tay's mind that he did not reveal. This business about the girl seemed to make a strangeness between the two men, as if they no longer were at ease to speak frankly with each other. Tay suddenly left the subject of the girl.

"I'll tell you what I have in mind. For tomorrow you drift around and look over the territory, find some streams to fish in. The day after, there's a council meeting in the courthouse. I'll be there. Next to my office is a store room. I made a hole in the wall. You'll be able to see and listen without being spotted yourself. I'll send the deputies away."

"Somebody on the council?"

"I don't know. I could be all wild, but you'll have a fresh slant. *You* take a look at them and tell me what you think."

"And Esparto?"

"As I tell you it's only a guess, a hunch. All I know is that somebody in the council or close to it knows all my moves when I want to check on either robberies or cattle stealing. Somebody is playing a tune and making me dance to it."

"But Roy is in the boothill."

Tay shrugged. "That, of course, could be guess too. He was out on posse somewhere, went off alone and somebody slugged him. The horse brought him into town. Otherwise nobody might ever have heard of what became of him. But after all he could have stopped here merely because he needed the job."

"A slug in the back, it must have been,"

said Carl. "Roy was a hard man to catch in front of a gun. Could look like somebody was trying to pay back a debt—an old debt of a slug in the back."

"Could be," said Tay slowly, "And then again. . . . It's a long guess. No one ever saw Esparto." . . .

Carl was standing in the middle of the stream, playing his fly up and down, trying to tease a fish to bite. But with no luck. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the man watching him from near the tree, long before the man realized that Carl Retton knew he was there.

It would be an easy rifle shot to pick off a fisherman standing precariously on stony footing, and the man had a rifle, held casually enough. Yet there was about him an uneasiness, an almost belligerent uneasiness, as if he could not make up his mind about something.

Carl, pretending that his right arm was tired, shifted the rod to his left and kept whipping it, while his right hand went into the creel and got a grip on the pistol he kept there. In the creel he pointed it at the stranger.

The rifle lifted a little, as if with sudden decision, and Carl turned abruptly to face the man, pretending to discover him. The rifle relaxed. "Howdy," said Carl.

THERE was a mere grunt for an answer. The man was tall, heavily-barreled, with baby-blue eyes in a ruddy face, and a rough smear of brown mustache. He was staring frankly at Carl from under a scowl, with a peculiar bull-like challenge in his attitude. Carl, with the long experience at sizing up men, recognized the unpredictable-killer type.

"Whose stream are you fishing?" said the man, accusation riding his voice.

Carl made his voice very easy and put on a smile, "I guess I don't know. Does it matter much?"

"Mebbe." The tone kept plucking at trouble. "Where you from?"

"Texas. Somebody told me there was trout up here. You ever get any?"

"Texas is a long ways from here. What you doin'—just travelin' through?"

"Could be," said Carl, unperturbed. "I'm a hound for fishing. Thought I'd catch me a mess of trout."

The man was not impressed. He kept studying Carl with a strange annoyance in his eyes. "Traveling through is a very good idea," he said. "Specially when you're on private territory. Sometimes it's actually healthy to just drift on."

No diplomat this one, Carl thought with grim amusement. No skeletons in this fellow's closet; if he had any he'd let them dangle on the gallery. He smiled his best, "You sure don't hand out the welcome mat in these parts do you?"

"Wipe that dumb grin off your face and start drifting," said the man, jerking the rifle a little.

Carl shrugged then and retreated to the opposite side of the stream, keeping his new-found friend in sight till he could mount his horse and swing out of range.

"That's Luke Norton, the Swinton foreman," said Tay at supper. "A queer cuss. Doesn't like strangers and makes no bones about it. Never could quite figure why they keep him on."

"Maybe for sentimental reasons," mused Carl.

He was ensconced the next day in the storeroom behind Tay's office in Carter, among guns and ammunition and office supplies. He was peeking through the hole in the wall and making his judgment of the five men on the council. Garnett was sitting with his back to Carl, and opposite him, at the head of the table, was Dekker Swinton, a man in his fifties, tall, gray-haired and impressive.

There was a definite air of distinction about him, of wealth and position. He was soft-spoken even when he asserted himself. He had a quiet authority and Carl could readily see why he was chosen for council head.

A red-faced, bony man, Ray Sanderson, sat on Swinton's right. He looked like a Swede, with his small round blue eyes. He had a reputation for toughness and kept a pretty rough crew on his big ranch. It was said he would hire anybody who would work hard—no questions asked. His temper and his gun were close relatives.

Next to him sat Morgan, a young pale man in town clothes. He was the leading merchant with some interest in logging and ranching on the side. He looked like a man who liked his liquor and his cards,

but he was certainly not anybody's fool.

Across from Sanderson and Morgan sat Denton, the banker, a fat, sour-faced man, whose tiresome air of sincere self-righteousness at once put him beyond suspicion in Carl Retton's mind.

Ira Swath, a huge hulk of a man, with a rubber face was next. He had a habit of rubbing his hammy hands over his face and completely distorting his features while he spoke. He cast his head from one side to the other and his small beady gray eyes would wander evasively over whoever he was speaking with. He was about the coarsest man Carl had seen in a dog's age and he spat and picked his teeth constantly. He owned a horse ranch where he broke and traded stock for both ranching, logging and army use. If anyone was looking for a badman for theatrical purposes, Swath, with his two silver-laid, ebony-hefted guns, his gravel voice and his crude manners, would certainly fill the bill.

Carl Retton's scrutiny quickly narrowed down to Swath, Morgan and Sanderson. One of these three was of interest. Sanderson was complaining in a sharp voice about the inefficiency of the sheriff's posse and vigilante system. Usually part of the posse got hot on the trail of the thieves, but eventually lost the scent while the major part of the riders were led on continual wild goose chases. It was up to the sheriff to show some better generalship. Why, for instance, didn't he live in town and keep more in touch?

Carl, through his hole in the wall, saw the back of Tay's neck redden, but before the sheriff could answer, old man Swinton spoke up. He had brought Tay Garnett in and he was satisfied with him. He had offered him the hunting ranch house, on the edge of his ranges because it was the only halfway decent place for a man of Garnett's fine reputation.

"I don't think it's necessary for the sheriff to ride on posse himself. There's plenty to do in town."

"I'll say there is," said Denton. "We sent a gold shipment out of the bank last Thursday, and you all know what happened to it. Somebody here in town has just a little too much information." He cast an angry glance at Garnett. "Somebody got onto that load of hay."

CARL noted that Tay kept his voice in as he answered. "Don't you figure it looked a little queer, sending a small wagonload of hay bales from here to Jackson Junction? I told you what I thought of that. You can buy all the hay you want in Junction. Anybody laying for that gold would be suspicious about a load of hay bales like that."

"Not unless he was a mind-reader," retorted the banker.

"Yeah," said Swath. "That load was going the wrong way. I sometimes buy hay from outside. Never heard of anybody shipping it to the Junction."

"Fact is," Morgan the merchant put in, "Carter is getting a hell of a name. Seems to me that Sheriff Garnett brought in here with him nothing much but a fine reputation. What we need is some action."

That made a tense silence in the council room. Morgan was an important man. Under other circumstances a man in Garnett's position would have taken this as an invitation to get out. Tay however, sat tight, drumming his fingers on the long table. Dekker Swinton cleared his throat. "I think you're being pretty hasty, Tom. I have all kinds of confidence in Tay Garnett. I stand fully in back of him."

"Whatever that means," Denton said.

Here, Carl sensed, was a man who stood alone, who had some courage to keep complaining. He gained a little more respect for the sour-faced money man. Swinton gave Denton an icy look, then ran his glance around the table:

"Tay Garnett is good enough for me, gentlemen."

Carl sweated a little, his neck hairs crept. He was trying to picture Dekker Swinton with black mustaches and a large round-brimmed, cone crowned hat.

But Denton kept at it, "Morgan is right. We've got everything here from cattle rustling and bank robbing to . . . Well, what about that train job at Elder pass? No, I tell you. It looks bad. We've got a so-called famous lawman as sheriff, but nothing is done. The things go on. Nothing is done."

Carl saw his friend squirm again, and that bothered him. Tay was not the squirming kind. Dekker said assertively

again, finishing the discussion: "A man can't be everywhere, Ralph."

Ira Swath suddenly burst into a huge rattling guffaw. "No, he sure can't. Not and sparking his gal at the same time, hey, Sheriff?" And he kept laughing as if the whole matter was a joke.

Denton and Morgan chuckled, but Swinton kept icily stern. "I reckon we'd best adjourn the meeting."

There was a short discussion of other matters, and some financial affairs, and then the meeting broke up. Carl watched the men drift out of the room with the weird feeling that the whole thing had been a puton show. For whose benefit he could not fathom.

He plugged the hole in the wall, hung the calendar back over it and drifted out into the office where he built himself a smoke. After about fifteen minutes Tay came in. He sat down in silence and lit a cigar. "Well," he said at last. "How does it look to an outsider?"

"They sure raked you over the coals," said Carl, watching his friend. "Seems to me you're ringed into somebody's private dance and you're getting your nose skinned and no thanks. I wouldn't have your job for all the speckled trout in Nevada."

Tay said, almost lightly, "I got my reasons for keeping it."

Carl Retton looked down at his smoke, "Yes, she's a mighty fine looking girl. Her old man is no slouch either."

Garnett's eyes became slitted. Again there was that odd feeling of uneasiness between the two friends, which had prevailed two nights before when Carl had arrived. Silence rode between them till Tay said: "You didn't answer my question. How does it look to you?"

"I'll count Denton and Swath out. They are what they look like. No acting there. Sanderson is an interesting cuss. You never can tell what's behind that type." He shrugged. "It's not easy to guess at. Maybe nobody on the council knows anything. Maybe it's all wild. I'll say that Denton has something, though, when he says that someone got onto that hayload. No matter which way it's going, it takes a damned long nose to smell gold in a load of hay. Somebody tipped off somebody."

"Only Denton, his son and I knew about it," said Garnett. "Young Denton is the treasurer in the bank. The three of us loaded the shipment. Even the teamster didn't know what was in that hay."

"And what happened to him?"

In a moment Tay Garnett bit his lip. "Bullet through the head, from the rear. Never knew what hit him."

Carl said slowly. "Never one to take a chance, Esparto."

Tay gave a dry, bitter chuckle and shrugged, and it was suddenly in Carl to say:

"Nobody but you three knew about that gold. Not even—?" He hardly finished the thought, and he did not speak. That silence was awkward again.

One of the deputies came in off the street and moved up the corridor. Tay got to his feet. "Since the Swinton's know who you are anyhow, we might as well put a bold face on it and go out in broad daylight and have a glass of beer. This afternoon you could then go fishing again."

"Yes," said Carl. "With my gun in my creel."

Chapter III

THE SECRET OF BUSHWACK RANGE

THEY went out of the court house building and across the street to Tanner's Saloon. Here, Carl got another look at Dekker Swinton. He was standing outside the saloon, talking to two younger men. The three men wheeled as Tay and Carl came up, almost as if they had been expecting them.

The elder man gave Carl a quick, easy scrutiny while Tay introduced him. He extended a broad hand of welcome to Retton, a veil of friendliness sliding down over his glance like a curtain: "Any friend of Tay Garnett's is a friend of mine. Glad to have you here with us, Mr. Retton."

He turned to the two men. "My nephew, Younger, and my foreman, Luke Norton."

Carl found Norton watching him, and there was no gleam of recognition in the man's eyes. He extended his heavy,

strong, somewhat sweaty hand and growled a curt, "Haryeh." And let it go at that.

Carl grinned and said, "I guess we already met."

Norton answered flatly, "I guess we did."

But it was Younger Swinton who held the attention. He was tall and dark, but otherwise he resembled his cousin. Big round dark eyes, a savage, intriguing mouth; flatness of cheeks denoting a careless, shrewd cruelty. But the face smiled with charm, and the handclasp was firm. Nevertheless Carl had a feeling of being watched from behind those dark eyes, calmly, curiously, as a puma might watch from a tree limb.

Younger said, "I hear you're up here looking for good fishing. Had any luck yet?"

"Not much," said Carl, "Not much yet." And suddenly the feeling came over him that the man was not asking him about fishing, and that he himself was not answering about fishing.

Dekker Swinton was speaking to Tay Garnett, "Let's go inside and set them up. I guess you can do with a drink all right, sheriff." He indicated the bar. "They sure gave you the once-over-lightly today. Denton got kind of noisy." He winked gravely, "But don't let them throw you. I guess you know, and they know too, who sets the pace and calls the tune around here."

The two men moved through the swing doors, Dekker Swinton's hand resting on Tay's shoulder. Younger Swinton then held one of the batwings open for Carl to let him pass through.

"Carl Retton," Younger said to the foreman, "is visiting Tay Garnett for the purpose of fishing himself a little mess of speckled trout. What do you think of that?"

"Speckled . . .?" said the foreman as if he had rehearsed the words. "Well ain't that interesting." And Carl felt that some understanding passed between the two men.

"Yes," said Younger Swinton. "Speckled. Funny enough, Retton, I'm the only one, or about the only one in these parts who really knows where speckled trout can be found."

Carl put his foot on the bar rail, and caught for a fleeting instant Garnett's glance in the bar mirror. He said easily, "Yeah? Well, you're just the hombre I want to connect with, then."

THE five men were lined up along the mahogany. Tanner's was a huge, elaborate place. Carter's best people did their drinking here. A thirty-foot, ornamented plate glass mirror decorated the back bar. In it the five men looked at each other and themselves.

Dekker Swinton called for a pony of bourbon all around to give the beers a little boost. When the two bartenders had rushed to fill the glasses, Swinton lifted his and ran his glance over the row of men in the mirror.

"Gentlemen, here's destruction to our enemies." And as the five drinks were tossed off, "May the curses of hell fall on them."

Younger Swinton wiped the chaser's foam off his mouth and said with a grin, "Dekker never fails to send his first drink off with that toast."

The bourbon was at least four dollar stuff, the beer the best Carl had tasted in a dog's age. He put his glass down and looked at Younger, felt Luke Norton's opaque, boring stare on him. "A strange toast," he said quietly. "People like you, I reckon, don't have many enemies."

"Very well put," said the elder Swinton with dignity. He raised his glass. "I thank you for that. But a man never knows . . . No, a man never knows." He turned to Garnett then. "Tay, come into the dining room with me awhile. I want to talk to you about that bank matter."

When Carl was alone with the two men, Younger said, "You know where the Sioux Saddle is?"

"I got an idea."

"When you go a quarter mile northwest on the trail from Garnett's house, in across our ranges, you'll be able to see it from where the woods break into benchland. Well, you cross the saddle and strike west. Pass the first two streams." He went on to describe territory and trails, and landmarks.

"There's a pool under the second little water fall where they sometimes reach

and spawn. You'll find males go in there, too. But don't tell anybody. It's my private spot. I don't want it known."

"Plumb white of you," said Carl, poker-faced. "You don't mind if I have a try at it?"

"No," said Younger. "It's all right. Anything for a friend of Tay's."

"Yes," echoed Luke Norton with sudden rough affability. "It's all right. Anything for the sheriff's friends. You go right ahead and fish. You should have told me you knew Garnett yesterday."

They kept small-talking a while, then took their leave. Carl finished his drink and drifted into the dining room, but he did not see either Swinton or Tay Garnett there. "They left a while back," said the waiter.

After that he walked up past the courthouse and looked in the yard, but there was no sign of Tay's horse—no sign of Younger nor Norton either. Carl drifted up and down through town for a while, and a strange panic increased in him. No one had seen any of the men. It was as if they had all silently disappeared.

He stopped at the boothill and found Roy Eldridge's marker, an elaborate sandstone:

"Here rests the mortal remains of Roy B. Eldridge, sheriff of Carter County. Taken from this life in the performance of his duty. March 2, A.D. 1884."

"Dekker Swinton donated that there stone," said the old-timer tending the grass. "Felt mighty bad about it, I reckon. He was the one brung Eldridge in here to clean up the place . . ."

Thoughtfully Carl walked out to the road and climbed into the saddle.

Back at Garnett's place he walked through the empty ranch house. No sign of Tay. He made a cup of coffee and a sandwich, then picked up rod and creel, putting one of his revolvers into the creel. After selecting his best trout flies from his cigar box, he was ready to leave.

Then a thought struck him, and he quickly gathered up an extra shirt, pants and a pair of riding gloves. To this he added a sofa pillow, rolling the whole in a slicker to be cattle-tied. After slinging his saddle on a fresh horse he was on

his way, off into the high winding trails.

PICKING his way over the Swinton ranges and through the Sioux Saddle, it did not take him much more than an hour and a half to find the waterfall and the pool stretching out beneath it. Stark granite and basalt rocks rose to a height of fifty feet on three sides of the pool, with a flat formation of terraces on the fourth. On the terraces were scrubby growths of pine and alder, some laurel.

Just for beans, Carl dropped one of his favorite flies from there, but there was no reaction. He stepped along the edges of the pool under the fall that was now just a tinkling summer trickle, lacing the fly over every square yard of surface.

No single flop of tail, no stir, no bubbles. He let his eyes roam over the cliff tops on either side of the fall. A man with enemies would be a sucker to fish from here. From at least two places a man could pot him easily.

He went back to the bushes and feverishly started to work. Branches, shirt, gloves and sofa pillow, topped by his hat, held out his long pole in the water. Stepping back under the foliage and off the winding approach trail, he glanced at his handiwork.

It looked false and phony, and only a damned fool would try to still-fish here, but it might pass inspection from above. He had pulled out his light Marlin carbine and sat hunkered down against the rock with the rifle at ready, his eyes slowly and methodically sweeping the rock edges above.

He'd have to be fast of eye and trigger if he hoped to catch anything here. A shot from above would show no reaction on the dummy and the shooter would know he was being baited and would not come down. This would be a case of snapshooting at fire and pronto.

The float drifted gently in the pool. There was no stir of water or wind. The fall trickled endlessly into the silence, picking time into little pieces.

If there *was* a bushwhacker. He *could* be cock-eyed of course. It was a cinch that Tay was doubtful about his own suspicions, or he would have spilled them. And Paula? Was she a puma, or just a housecat?

He sat in the beautiful stillness, into which only the sound of the thin fall intruded, just loud enough to drown out all other sounds, like those of approaching feet or hoofs.

Carl's knee joints began aching. He had stayed in one position too long. He shifted his weight, never for one second taking his rifle from the ready.

Something happened then to steal his attention. The float wiggled, bobbed, went under and came up again, racing away on the surface.

A grin was almost on Carl's face when the rifle spat sharply from above, on his right. Once, twice, the bullets slammed through the dummy and ground up little sprays of rock flakes and dust.

On the second shot Carl was firing, snapping two bullets at the hat and shoulder he saw behind the rifle barrel. He heard a choked exclamation, a grunt, and the hat disappeared and the rifle came hurtling through the air to splash into the water.

There was no further sound from above—not a stir. Carl stood breathlessly with his smoking weapon at ready for a full two minutes.

"Well," he said ponderingly. "That one got away, too."

For a space, as he rode away, he was undecided whether or not to head for town to look for Tay. Then he determined to stop at the ranch house first. As he rode on, the fact that Tay had made no effort to let him know where he was struck him as damned queer. The episode with the mysterious rifleman on the cliff annoyed him too.

He wondered again how serious Tay Garnett was with Paula Swinton. Though he was playing the game with her. They had looked lovey-dovey enough the night before, and he had felt like a third wheel to a gig.

HE CAME down off the low foothills and was crossing the ranges nearing Tay's ranch house. The sun was slipping hurriedly down behind the mountains, casting long blue-black shadows ahead of him.

Very soon it would be dark. He pulled up his horse and sat still in the saddle. His neck hairs stood up as if an unseen

hand had stroked them the wrong way. Everything seemed queerly still. He froze in the saddle and felt chill waves envelop him.

He had felt this way only a few times before in his life, but the warning had always been right. There was no question but that he and Tay *had* blundered into something. But for God's sake—where *was* Tay? Boothill had room for so damned many more.

He could barely see the roof of the ranch house in the distance between the trees. Someone, he thought feverishly, is waiting to spot me as I come in across the flats. Immediately he veered the horse over toward the trees and rode under their deep shadows.

Darkness fell rapidly upon him and he dismounted and hitched the horse to an alder, then proceeded on foot. Walking softly he came up behind the corral to see that Tay's horse was not there. Nor was his saddle on the pole. The house rack in front was empty, yet the dead stillness was almost unnerving. He sneaked his boots off. Then, carrying them in one hand, his pistol in the other, he passed along the small back barn and reached the kitchen door. The lock did not catch, and he pushed gently with his finger and the door opened noiselessly. He was inside then, on his stocking feet, listening. There was that stillness yet, in which nothing is heard and still one feels that another is breathing nearby.

He moved over to the sink and stood there trying to remember whether the door to the main room had been open when he left. It was closed now. Suddenly his heart stood still. There was a broken glass in the sink. It had not been there when he had made his cup of coffee at noon.

He faced the door then. Was there someone beyond that door, in the main room? His neck hairs crept again. He would walk through that door and into a waiting bullet.

He pushed the door open and tossed his boots onto the floor inside.

The reaction was terrific. A startled exclamation was followed by two shots, one of which slammed into the door jamb while the other smashed a china cupboard in the kitchen. Apparently a man had been

sitting in the northeast corner of the room between the two bookshelves, waiting for Carl's arrival. Protected, his position would have had the advantage no matter which door Carl entered through.

Carl ran silently out through the kitchen door and onto the gallery that ran past the main room. Through a window he saw Luke Norton stand in tense bewilderment in the middle of the floor, completely baffled. He had a cocked pistol in each hand, moving them in slow arcs over doors and windows. His mouth was open and Carl could almost hear him dragging in his breath.

Then the Swinton foreman backed suddenly out the front door, deciding on a flank attack. He stepped off the east end of the front gallery and prepared to circle the house that way. Carl Retton walked after him on the gallery and when he reached the corner of the house, called out, quietly:

"Norton. Here."

The man gave a yell and whirled and threw down with both guns at the stocking-footed figure. The three guns fired almost at one time, giving a combined thunderclap that died out with surprising quickness in a faint whisper among the trees.

Then all was completely still again, as if it had never happened, and Carl heard once more the regular, almost unhurried sound of his own heart beating.

Norton was sitting on the scant grass of the side yard in a queer, buckle-kneed position. There was a utter surprise and anger at being caught so flatfooted on the big man's face. The guns lay in limp hands over each knee. They stirred slightly as if trying to lift, then their owner keeled directly backwards, smacking his head into the earth with a little thud.

He was dead when Carl got over to where he lay. "Too fast," Carl murmured. "I was too excited." There was not even a show of blood on the foreman's lips—no sign of death struggle. Only a little round hole in his shirt, close under the heart and near the breast bone.

He stood staring at this man, whom he had talked to only twice. The trail must be getting hot. Again the question of Tay's whereabouts made him panicky. Evidently somebody had decided to strike

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fast. Twice now he had evaded death—but had Tay?

After a moment's consideration he picked up the dead man and carried him to the barn. There he dropped him in the feed box. The sun had vanished behind the mountains when he retrieved his horse and saddle, and rode a fresh horse across to the Swinton ranges. If the secret was there, he was determined to find it.

Chapter IV

KILLERS LOOK TO BOOTHILL

EVENTUALLY the many buildings of the Swinton ranch loomed out of the darkness. The main building was a huge white rectangle in the moonlight with lamplight showing only faintly in the short kitchen wing at the far end. Across the wide yard a lantern blinked sleepily in a bunkhouse window.

Carl reconnoitered the place on foot, then walked softly to the kitchen gallery and opened the door. Paula Swinton was standing with her back to him, washing out some strips of cloth in the sink. A pan of boiling water stood on the stove. Several strips of torn linen sheeting lay on the table behind her.

As the door clicked she said over her shoulder, "Luke, I'm glad you're here. Well, did you—find him home?"

"No," said Carl deliberately. "I didn't find Tay. Where is he?"

She whirled, a stifled cry on her lips. Her eyes went wide with terror and her hand flew to her mouth. A pistol lay on the table between them. He picked it up.

There was blood on the table, on the cloths—fine crimson spray on the floor. "Somebody get hurt?" he said. "What's wrong here, can I help?"

She paled, her cheeks trembling, "What do you mean?"

He took her by the arm. "You better let me see him. I want to talk to him, and I mean talk. For one thing I want to know where Tay is."

Strain suddenly broke her, and tears of desperation brimmed in her eyes. "He's hurt," she whispered hoarsely. "He's badly hurt. He's dying."

They went into the bedroom.

MANHUNT IN BOOTHILL

Paula went over to the bedside and took her stand in a defiant manner. "He got hurt cleaning his gun," she said.

At this moment Younger opened his eyes and saw Carl.

"Ah! Dead men walk, I see."

Carl walked around the bed. "Not quite dead," he said. "Did you get the bullet out?"

Younger Swinton looked up at him as Carl began undoing the crude bandages. "What the hell are you doing here? What do you want?"

"Lie still," said Carl. He had the bandages open.

Carl looked up at Paula. "Get me that pan of boiling water in the kitchen, and a pair of long embroidery scissors. I'll get that bullet out. It's making him bleed too much."

He went with her while she got the things; and returning to the bedroom he tied Younger's wrist to the bed post with a strip of cloth. The wounded man had closed his eyes again. Around his neck Retton now noticed a ribbon, from which hung a bullet, fastened by a tiny ring.

His pulses pounded against his temples. He could hardly believe his eyes—the soft lead nose of the bullet had a crude shallow X scratched on it.

Younger opened his eyes again, and Carl, pointing to the shell, said, "A funny way to carry a pocket piece."

The dark eyes glimmered; the white teeth showed. "The only bullet I ever got in the back. I'm keeping it till I can return it."

"Hold his left arm," he told Paula.

He worked in silence for a minute.

He looked up quickly from the bullet he had just extracted. It carried the same crude cross-marking as the one Younger wore around his neck. He was now staring into the muzzle of a slender small-caliber pistol. The puma eyes behind that gun were as steady as the weapon itself.

"Well," he said, his brain racing. "So the cards are on the table. Now what?"

"You guess," she said. "I'm sorry this has to be thanks for saving my husband's life."

"Your husband?"

She nodded with a grim, mocking smile.

"I'm kind of tired," he said. "Mind if



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I have a smoke while you decide what to do?"

He gambled that she would not quite know. This had been as sudden to her as it had been to him. She was hoping that Younger would wake up to give her advice. "Go ahead," she said. "Dekker will be here shortly. It'll be your last smoke."

SHE was talking to cover her nervousness. He took out the makings and rolled himself a cigarette. He did not have to guess any longer. All his bullets were marked with crosses. He had done it for years—as a matter of routine. The one in the ribbon around the wounded man's neck was the one he had fired into Esparto's back two years ago. The man on the bed was Esparto.

The setup he understood now. Dekker Swinton had hired and sponsored Tay Garnett as a cover-up. While they treated him well and hoodwinked him, the very fact of Swinton's backing allayed any suspicion in the community. Tay's reputation did that. The scheme had worked once or twice before. They had first tried it with Roy Eldridge and Roy had gotten wise.

The bank job and train robberies were Esparto's—a little too close to home. Too many trackers were on his trail outside of this territory, and the Swintons probably needed money. The gang scattered for safety.

Sweat beaded suddenly out on his forehead as it occurred to him that Luke Norton had not been waiting for him, but for Tay Garnett. While Younger Swinton, alias Esparto, was taking care of Carl from the cliff top, Luke Norton was supposed to finish Tay. With one stroke the two rangers would be robbed forever of the chance to reveal the secret they had stumbled upon.

Paula Swinton was watching his cigarette. "I could do with one myself," she said. "Mind rolling me one?"

He complied, and as she watched his fingers move to the task, she said, "Watch your hands. No tricks. This thing goes off easy."

"I don't doubt it," he said. She and Esparto were of the same breed. He recalled the ranch family, especially the young girl, sitting dead against the kitchen

en wall. He tossed the smoke across the bed to her and she picked it up without taking her eyes from his.

"It's too bad," she said, "that you had to come snooping in here. You're kind of nice otherwise. But I had you spotted right off. I've seen rangers before."

He shrugged. "I thought I looked like an innocent fisherman."

She shook her head. "Not a chance. You man-hunters all have a look you can't miss. Got a match?"

He picked the match from his breast pocket and she said, "Just toss it. Don't light it."

At the same time there was the soft sound of hoofbeats from the entrance to the yard. A breath of relief went from her and she relaxed perceptibly.

If this was Dekker Swinton he would have the chance of a snowball in hell. He tossed the match then, flicked it from between his thumb nail and forefinger, flaming.

It fell on the bed near her and for an instant her startled eyes went to it. Carl dived across the bed, his hand grasping

the pistol as it went off. The bullet tore through his thigh, but he had the weapon.

She fought with surprising strength, snatched his gun from its holster before he knocked it from her hand. He got an arm lock behind her back, another lock around her neck and backed into a corner far from the bed.

Younger Swinton had opened his eyes and was trying to sit up. A pistol came suddenly into his hand.

"Stand still, Paula," he said. "Stand still. Don't fight, you idiot, and I'll nail him."

At that moment the door swung open, a figure appeared against the dim light. "Dad!" cried Paula. "Dad—help—get him!"

A shot shook the room. Younger Swinton's arm sank down. He turned halfway over with a groan.

Tay Garnett walked into the room, he kicking Swinton's pistol under the bed as the girl darted to Younger's side. "Younger! Younger!"

With a calmness that surprised even Carl Retton, the sheriff of Carter county

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pulled a set of handcuffs from his pocket and chained her to the bedpost.

CARL walked over to the bed. Younger Swinton had received the bullet just where Carl had removed the other. This time there was little chance of recovery. Carl looked down past the hysterically sobbing woman. "Como 'sta, Esparto?" he said grimly. "Los muertos vayan. eh?"

"Esparto?" Tay breathed, startled. "El sombrero Mexicano," Carl went on. Younger interrupted him: "To hell with that lingo. I never learned to speak it. Luke's the one who's good at that." "Was," said Carl.

Younger Swinton looked sharply at him, then said, with a glance at Tay Garnett, "Looks like it. Something went wrong." He swore a string of oaths and gritted his teeth in pain. "How did you know? How did you know?"

"I didn't till now," said Carl, and lifted up the bullet in the string. There was a queer triumph in his voice. "This is mine, too."

"We burned all that Spanish stuff long ago. We shaved off the mustaches . . ." "Don't talk so much," implored Paula. But she was too late. Younger Swinton, alias Esparto, the man Carl Retton had hunted for two years, lay still in death.

Tay and Carl went outside. A couple of men came across the yard cautiously from the bunkhouse. Three more stood in the dimly lit doorway. On seeing the sheriff's star on Tay, one of the men said, "What's wrong, Sheriff. What was the shootin'?"

Tay Garnett ran his eyes over the men. None of them were armed. They were mildly excited, but his presence seemed to calm them. "Ever hear about the Mexican bandit, Esparto?"

The second man hesitated, then nodded and said, "Yeah, sure. I reckon I have. Why?"

Tay put foot to stirrup and swung into the saddle. "I guess you men better go looking for another job. You been working for him."

There was a stir among them. They stared curiously toward the main house. "Don't go in there. I'll be sending some

MANHUNT IN BOOTHILL

deputies out after a while." Garnett kneed his horse around and rode off with Carl.

The two men rode along talking, "You had me in a sweat," said Carl. "I didn't know where the hell you were."

"Dekker kept riding me around in circles all day, leading me on wild goose chases, talking about some rustling jobs. Finally he let me go." He snorted. "When Barton, my deputy, told me you'd went fishing I thought maybe it was a signal to meet you home."

"I knew you usually give your horse a feed of oats before you turn him loose," said Carl. "That's why I dumped him in the feed box. I didn't want to leave any notes in case somebody should be following up Luke Norton."

"Somebody did," said Tay Garnett, and he added after a long spell, "There's two in the feed box now. Carter will need a new council head."

Carl whistled, and there was a long silence between them. At length he said, "You feel bad—I mean—about . . . her?"

Tay seemed to chew on something. "Never did take to women that smoked, unless of course you meet 'em in the proper places, like a saloon, or a fancy house. But to marry . . ."

"I didn't know just how you felt about the girl. You put on a pretty good act." He hesitated. "You sure you don't feel pretty bad . . . ?"

Tay Garnett gave a grunt. "When Denton and I made that gold shipment, we made it small. You asked me if no one else did not know about it. Well, someone did. I dropped a hint to Paula. When some of the money showed up in the local bars and stores I knew I had something. That's when I sent for you."

"But Esparto," said Carl. "What a long shot! I can't get over that one."

"You remember how sick Roy was when we found that rancher family murdered?" said Tay. "He told me later. It was his brother's family Esparto had finished off. When I saw the headstone in the Carter boothill I knew Esparto must be somewhere near here. Because Roy swore he'd never quit his trail. Remember? When you can't find a man, Carl, look to boothill."

THE END



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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 9)

a couple of weeks. But the day came when he decided to go into town to blow off some steam and spend some of his wealth.

In a saloon in Socorro, he filled up on rotgut and was throwing his money around and raising hell in general, when his ramrod friend found him. The ramrod tried to get him to quit drinking and come back out to work. Joel put up an argument which ended only after Joel had stabbed his boss in the back with a Bowie knife, killing him on the spot.

A number of Socorro's citizens who witnessed the killing resented it. The ramrod was well-known and well-liked in the town. They disarmed Joel and escorted him to a convenient cottonwood tree, whose stout branches had felt more than one hang-rope. Just as Joel Fowler was about to be lynched, the sheriff, Warren Welton, appeared on the spot.

Sheriff Welton had earned the admiration and respect of the people of Socorro. He demanded, and got, the prisoner. In his speech to the mob he said, "We ain't havin' no more unlegal hangin's in Socorro. I aim to see that this-here killer gits a fair trial. Now, I'm takin' him over to th' jail. An' you folks gotta' promise me one thing—that is that you won't take him out of th' cell I put him in. If y'wont' promise that you won't take him out of th' jail I will quit this job as of now. What's yer choice? Do you promise, or do I quit?"

The people did not want to lose a first-class lawman. As one man they yelled, "You got our promise, Sheriff. We won't take Fowler out'n yore jail. Keep your badge on!"

Sheriff Welton lost no time in getting the sweating and thankful Fowler to the local hoosegow. Late that night, when the sheriff went home, he had no worries. He knew the people would keep their promise to him.

The people did keep their promise. True to their word, they did not take Joel Fowler from the jail. At dawn they broke in to the place, cowed the night jailor, and strung Joel Fowler up, right in his cell.

"PEACE," IT SAYS HERE!

(Continued from page 65)

of him, the fingers moving nervously. "Can he do that, Shumway?" he asked thickly.

The banker smiled faintly. "He can do it, Ben."

"Get his gun, O'Connor." Red motioned toward Sembler and the sheriff reached for it, but Sembler twisted away from him. The pearl-handled Colt flowed into his hands and came up fast, spilling lead.

Red threw himself to the side, his own sixgun out now, and he snapped a shot at Sembler's shoulder. The man weaved drunkenly, backing off, but his gun was still up and Red thought wildly, Killing's too good for him. I want him in jail, to break him!

But Sembler's next shot splintered the pine paneling beside Red's neck and then a gun exploded in the doorway and a shrill, wrenching pain shot up Red's leg as the bullet bit into his thigh and glanced along the bone.

He fell heavily, rolling on the floor, and other guns joined the crashing chorus. Dave Phelps slammed into the doorjamb and bent double before slipping forward on his face.

O'Connor's gun roared and Ben Sembler spun awkwardly and sat down, his breath expelled in a great grunt. His gun lifted again, wavering as he brought it on Red, but when the trigger clicked on a spent cartridge, he eyed, Sembler held it steady at it and then it came down and he tossed it.

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